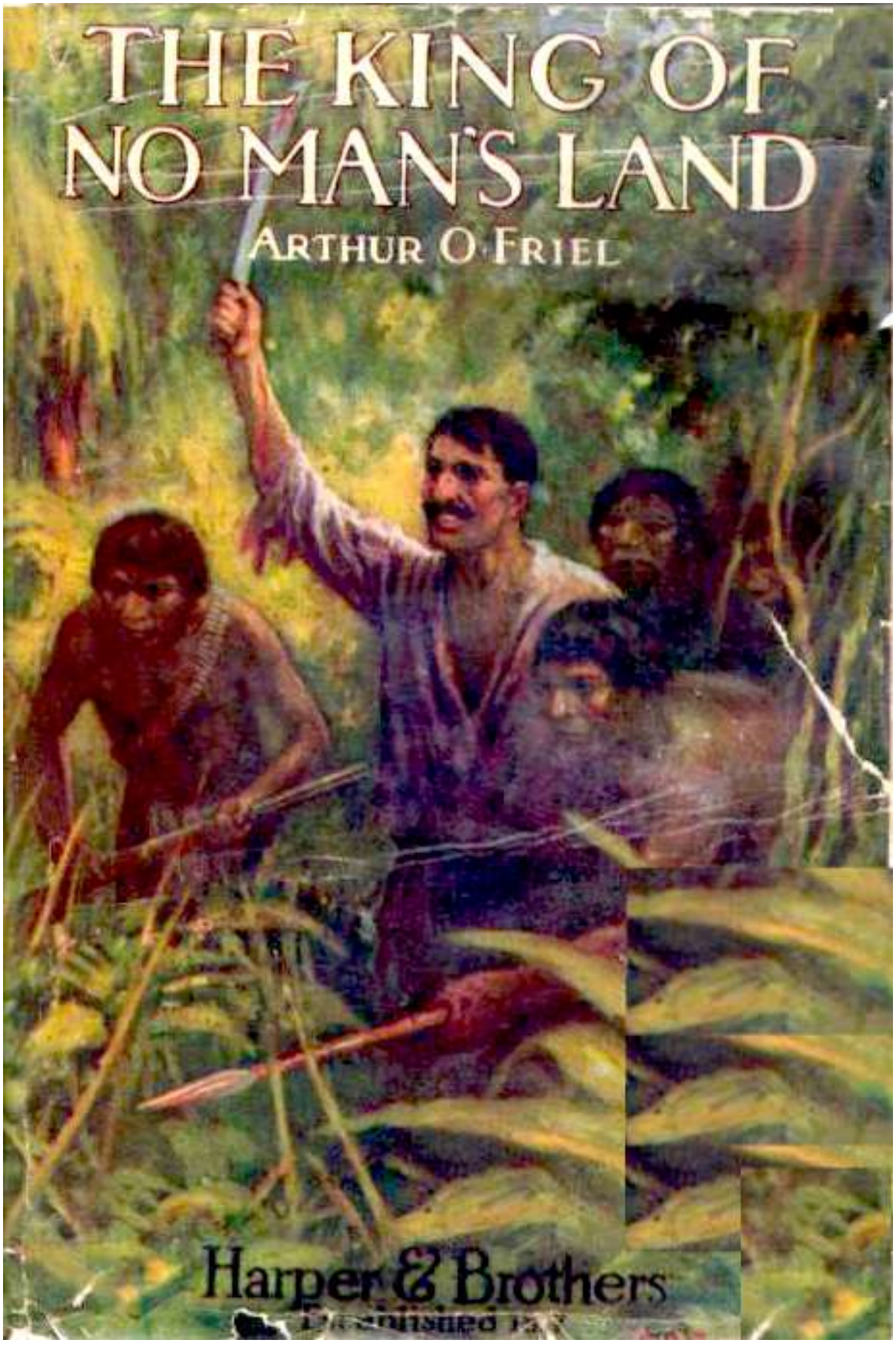
THE KING OF NO MAN'S LAND

ARTHUR O. FRIEL



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THE KING OF NO MAN'S LAND

A Four-Part Story
Part One

by
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CHAPTER I

MEN OF THE BUSH

THE head-hunter was consulting the devil.

Alone in the jungle, his back against the base of a colossal tree, his glassy eyes fixed in a vacant stare, he listened to the satanic counsel of the death-demon of the Jiveros. At his feet lay a calabash, containing the dregs of the coffee-colored bark decoction with which he had raised that malevolent spirit. Beside him, leaning against one of the tall buttress-roots among which he squatted, rose a straight, slender tube; his blow-gun. Against his hip hung his short dart-quiver, cotton-ball, and poison-gourd. The wish and the weapons for murder were his; and now he was receiving the diabolical approbation always sought by his people before an assassination—and always accorded.

"Kill him!" exhorted the demon. "It will be easy. Call him out—then shoot him. It is right that he should die, for he has four wives and you have only two. Then you will have six women, and a new head to shrink, and respect from your fellows."

The vacant eyes did not flicker, nor did the lips move. But the drugged brain visioned the shadowy grin of the fiend, and the crazed consciousness answered without speech.

"But he has brothers who will take my head in turn, and take his women and my own too."

"No!" disputed the infernal adviser. "Why stop at killing him alone? Kill them also, one by one, as fast as you can shrink the heads—for you must not neglect to make the heads small, and you can do only one at a time. So you shall have more heads, and more women. The youngest brother has no women yet, but his head is a head. Think of it! More women than the fingers on both your hands, and one—two—three—four fine heads! And then nobody will laugh at you because you lost that white-man head."

The dilated eyes narrowed slightly as a scowl lowered the black brows.

"Bad luck has been upon me since the head of the white was lost," was the soundless confession. "But how could I know that the head would be stolen while I was away on a hunt? If only I could get a white-man head with red hair! That would be better than the black-haired one I lost."

The demon laughed jeeringly.

"You are not likely to get another white-man head soon. You must kill that Indian with four wives. You must! And then his brothers. It is so easy—you will do it in this way. Be quiet and I will tell you."

The weird dialog went on. The scattered splotches of sunlight on the forest floor crawled slowly toward the motionless figure in the dim root-recess. Little breezes came and went. Somewhere a toucan yelped over and over: "*Piapocol piapocol piapocol!*" High above, invisible through the thick roof

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of branches and leaves, flying macaws screamed harshly. The narcotized senses of the squatting aborigine perceived none of these things. The Jivero demon-draught, which may grip its devotee for five hours or more, still held him in thrall.

Even when one of the creeping sun-splashes reached his feet and began ascending his legs he did not move. The rising light revealed muscular calves and haunches; stocky, deep-chested torso; thick neck encircled by a collar-like necklace of seeds and tiger-claws; heavy jaw, hard mouth, flaring nose; snaky eyes, low brow, long black hair. In the hair were a few bright toucan-feathers; from it, at the sides, projected ears thrust through with sections of wild cane which dangled to the shoulders. His build was that of a brute. His expression, as he still talked with the fiend he had called up, was that of a reptile. Limned against the gray-green tree as by a spotlight, he was a copper statue of abysmal savagery.

A flash of orange and red darted athwart the near green, followed by another and another. They wheeled, halted, poised on limbs, and became toucans. A moment of turning their huge-beaked heads this way and that—then they burst into raucous derision of the man below.

"*Piapoco! Piapoco!*" they yapped, hopping and thrusting their beaks as they yelled. Their screams, so near him, jarred on the dulled nerves of the savage. His opaque eyes flicked up at the birds. One hand stole automatically toward his blow-gun—but did not grasp it. The devil was insistently recalling his attention, and the hand sank.

"You will do it so!" adjured the evil spirit. "And then the head—cut down the back of the scalp—out comes the skull—then the pot and the hot sand——"

"*Piapoco! piapoco! piapoco! piapoco!*" railed the impudent chorus above.

Then, abruptly, it stopped. The big bills turned downward—but not toward the head-hunter. The black-red-gold bodies hopped around, the bold black eyes peered into the tangle—then three flashes shot again across the green. The birds were gone.

Only a Jivero whose instincts were numbed could fail to interpret that sudden silence and departure. But this man did fail. His eyes moved upward again, but in a vacant way. When they dropped they saw nothing new in the labyrinth of tree and vine. Nor did the protruding ears hear a tiny rustle among the leaves beyond.

For minutes the rustling continued—faint, elusive, less audible than the sough of lofty leaves moving in a breeze. Then it died. No other sound came, save the far-off snarling roar of a *cotomono* monkey. The near-by bush seemed to hold no life. But the noisy birds did not return.

Among the shadows where that rustle had sounded, something moved. A bent, hunched thing, it was; a crouching thing that stole slowly, smoothly nearer to the devil-dreamer. Leaves which touched it slipped soundlessly from its bare skin. Little pools left by the daily rain gave no plash as the advancing feet passed through them. No twig crackled, no branch swished back from the creeping form. Yet it made no apparent effort to avoid noise, gave no glance at the footing or the surrounding growth. It moved with the instinctive stealth of the born jungle-prowler, the utter silence of a drifting ghost. When it stopped, still crouching and peering through the leafy screen at the spellbound murderer among the roots, it had given not the slightest token of its presence.

For a long moment it stood there—a black-haired, light-skinned, maroon-clouted shadow among the shadows; a jungle man like the Jivero, yet altogether unlike him. The newcomer's bare body appeared more clean of skin and of build; his hair was not long and unkempt, but cut straight around at the level of the ear-tips. He looked more fit, more alert, more intelligent than the killer beyond him. Yet his face, as he scanned the other, held a ferocity no less deadly than that of the shrinker of human heads.

The menace of that narrow-eyed stare penetrated to the inmost consciousness of the squatting savage. Where bird-warning and bush-warning had passed unheeded, the primordial perception of unseen danger inherited from countless jungle-dwelling ancestors now gripped his brain. The voice of the demon died out. The blank eyes focused on the bush. The dangling right hand lifted and moved again toward the blow-gun. As his fingers curled around the weapon, the Jivero lurched up on his feet.

The leaves before him jumped, smitten by a swift-rising hand. A steel-tipped shaft poised, hissed forward. Before the Jivero

could move—before he could even breathe—the steel tore through him. He reeled back—coughed once—hung limp, nailed to the tree.

"Huh!" grunted the man in the bush, his grim mouth stretching gloatingly.

Then, turning, he grunted again—a subdued, wordless sound which did not carry far, yet brought immediate response. The rustling recommenced, more loudly now. Through the tangle came other figures in file. The spearman stepped out, walked over to the transfixed head-hunter, and stood in the attitude of a showman about to exhibit some marvel.

THE bush-screen parted again, forced open by rough hands. Into the little clear space emerged a hawk-faced, fierce-mustached, deep-tanned Spaniard. After him trooped more Indians.

One swift survey of the scene the white man took, noting the impaled savage, the blow-gun which had fallen from the lifeless hand, the gourd with its remaining drug. With a tigerish pounce he caught up the calabash. An instant of sniffing, then he nodded and tossed it aside.

"Is this all?" he jeered, jerking a thumb at the pierced figure against the tree-trunk. "One, drunk on devil-bark? A child could kill him."

The spearman's face clouded like that of a boy who, expecting praise, has been ridiculed. But he answered quietly:

"All, king. But Jivero is Jivero."

"Hah! Well said!" José approved. "A Jivero is a Jivero, and we spare none. And, *por Dios*, he was not so drunk—he stood and would fight, hah? And you nailed him up. A good cast, *hombre!* No accursed shrinker of heads escapes from a White One!"

Now the spearman grinned proudly as he turned to withdraw his weapon from the grip of the wood. In the faces of the other light-skinned warriors his pride was mirrored. Had not this king of theirs, in praising him, praised them also? It was so. All eyes centered on the sinewy white, who looked back at them with half-affectionate, half-sardonic approbation.

A formidable array they made, those jungle men, though not many of them could press into the small open space. Every one of them, from clean-cut hair to ground-gripping toes, was a natural athlete; lithe-muscled, firm-jawed, steady-eyed, poised with the ready ease born of alert strength. And if their vigorous physiques alone had not warned of their fighting power, their weapons would have made the most truculent antagonists wary. Strong bows and big quivers of war-arrows, heavy hardwood clubs, short throwing-spears and longer *lanzas*—these, deadly enough in themselves, were not all. Every second man wore, slung under the left arm by a diagonal bark-strip from the right shoulder, a keen machete. Every third man carried in the same fashion a hide cartridge-pouch, and in his right hand was a big-bored carbine.

The longest gun in the little army was that of the sun-bronzed white man, little whiter than themselves. A full-sized, full-magazined repeater, this was, and battered

and worn as if by long service; in fact, it looked much older than the carbines, which also showed signs of considerable use. It hung in its owner's fist as if it were an integral part of his arm; a deadly appendage which had been there for years, and without which he would feel crippled. If he was truly a king, he was a fighting ruler. And, king or not, there could be no doubt that he had long been a jungle denizen. His clothing proved that.

Unlike his men, he wore shirt, belt, and bagged trousers. But the garments had never been fashioned in a town, nor had the cloth been woven from threads of cotton or wool. It was made from *llanchama* tree-bark and dyed purplish-red with *achote*, as were the clouts of his followers; and the belt was no leather strap, but a braid of palm-fiber cords. He had neither hat nor boots. Utterly devoid of all insignia of regal rank—without even a crown of feathers—this must be a poor king.

Yet his next movement showed him to be an overlord. He lifted an imperious hand, and out from the surrounding knot of men stepped one whose bearing proclaimed him a chief; an older man than the Spaniard, yet one whose eyes showed calm respect for his junior. He halted and waited.

"We are near," asserted he of the hawk face. "This Jivero would not go far to take his drink."

The Indian nodded as if hearing something most obvious. He glanced up at a slanting sun-ray; followed it down to where it rested on the trunk of a young tree; moved to it, laid a thumb on its upper edge; measured off a short space on the bark above it with a finger; looked steadily at his commander.

"A short half-hour," the latter translated. "*Buenol* Then more Jiveros go howling to ——! Look now to the guns, *capitán*."

The chief turned and growled something at the gun-bearers. Each levered his breech-bolt partly back, peered within the magazine at the ready top cartridge, clicked his gun shut. From farther back in the bush, like soft echoes, sounded the subdued clatter of other rifles opening and closing in the hands of unseen men.

The spearman, who now had retrieved his wet javelin from the tree, walked stolidly past the Spaniard. The latter slapped him lightly on a bare shoulder.

"Good scouting!" he approved. "You shall go on, flanking as before."

The scout's chest swelled and his eyes gleamed again, but he spoke no word. Into the green tangle he slipped soft-footed. The others, with a final glance at the body huddled where it had dropped from the tree, fell into file and moved back into the labyrinth. In a few minutes only the Spaniard was left, gazing hard-faced at the thing his flanker had speared.

"Hah!" he chuckled mirthlessly. "While you talked with your devil of death he let death come to you! Even a Jivero could laugh at that joke. I will tell your friends, if any still live after I— *Por Dios!* What is that?"

Muffled by the intervening jungle, from somewhere off at the left broke three gunshots. The listening man's face twisted in sudden rage. He leaped forward.

"The fools! Some have gone on and opened fire——"

Three more explosions sounded in a swift rip. The infuriated commander halted as if petrified.

"But no! Those are not our guns! Neither are they Jivero muskets——"

The staccato reports burst into a ragged but steady crackle. With them merged a few dull black-powder barks and a noise like a savage chorus of hate.

"*Madre de Dios!* Those are high-powered rifles! White men fight there!"

A headlong crash into the bush, and he was gone.

CHAPTER II

FIGHTERS THREE

BACK to back, crouching between a couple of robust trees and facing outward, three white men fought doggedly and desperately against foes half-seen amid the encompassing screen of leaves.

They had poor targets—a bare brown arm hurling a spear; a glimmer of steel as a muzzle-loading rifle slid around a tree-trunk; an arrow streaking from a clump of broad-leaved plantain; a dodging movement among a tangle of lianas. But they were taking heavy toll. Though badly outnumbered and totally surrounded, they shot with the grim coolness of veterans and the deadly accuracy of expert gunmen; and at every crack of their bolt-action rifles something fell heavily in the bushes. Each was shooting back and forth along the arc before him, and the three arcs combined to form a circle of leaden death.

But the bullet-riddled enemy yielded no ground. The jungle seemed spawning fresh warriors to replace the fallen. New spears swished out of the green, new arrows whirred, new poisoned darts snicked into the leaves, new yells of ferocity blended with the occasional *whang* of a musket. The trees between which the fighting trio had taken cover were furred with missiles. The fern-foliage around them was drooping in torn tatters. The broad hats had been struck from their heads, revealing three shades of hair—black, blond, and vivid red. And out from the black beard masking the jaw of the tallest oozed a trickle of wet crimson.

"Cripes!" gritted the red-headed one, rapidly reloading his piece. "Got to dig up more shells, looey! I'm most shot out. How ye fixed?"

"Same way," clipped the blond, firing

as he spoke. "No time to open a can—" *Crack!* "—use your side-arm!" *Crack!*

"Yeah! Git back there, ye dirty ——!"

A shot terminated his growl. A fierce face toppled back and was gone.

"Ouch! Gun's red-hot!" complained the red man, meanwhile shifting his muzzle toward a disturbed bush-clump. "Where'n ——'s all these guys come from?"

He shot again. The bush shook violently, then stood still, a motionless bare foot protruding from its base.

"That's just where they come from, Tim," dryly answered the black-bearded man, reloading in his turn. "Merry! Nail this fellow, quick!"

He ducked as he spoke. A spear hurtled through the space where his face had been. The blond, obeying his order, snapped a bullet into a momentarily revealed coppery chest. Another savage collapsed.

As the black-beard threw his refilled gun to his shoulder, a shrill yell from the outer bush rose high over the other battle-howls. Another joined it, and another. Then out broke a volume of ferocious shouts almost drowning the previous uproar.

The tight-set jaws of the beleaguered three clamped harder. Through his teeth red Tim grated:

"Here's where we git it! They got reinforcements. We ain't got a chance."

"Carry on!" snapped the black-beard.

"Aw, sure." Tim's gun spoke twice. "Till we're clean snowed under. That won't be long— Huh! My gosh, cap, listen!"

Through the hullabaloo beyond them smashed new gun-shots. Rapidly they increased in speed and volume.

"Repeaters!" shouted the blond man. "Repeating rifles—forty-fours—a young army of them!"

As he spoke, the rain of missiles pouring at them dwindled and died. The assailants too were listening to the advancing roar of gun-fire. For a moment the three white men poised like statues, their eyes widening in astonished half-hope. Repeating rifles, fast coming nearer—could they possibly be guns of rescue?

"Nope!" Tim answered the unspoken question. "This ain't our lucky day, and we ain't got no friends anyways. Whoever's comin' will jump us jest the same as these guys. Look out! They're goin' to mop up!"

As if aroused by his gruff voice, the savages charged.

Like leaping demons they came, reckless of the bullets which instantly tore into them. Over falling bodies bounded fiend-faced men with spear and club, determined to overwhelm and annihilate the dauntless but pitifully small knot of whites. Some of these also fell; others closed in.

Up rose the three, dropping rifles but drawing flat pistols. Still back to back, they hurled a terrific fire into the naked chests swarming at them—twenty-one crashing reports merging into one ripping roar. The ground around them became a shambles.

Jamming together as they converged on their prey, the Indians fell before those devastating pistols as if collectively struck down by a thunderbolt. Around the two arrow-studded trees rose a thigh-deep ring of dead. Upon it slipped and sprawled unwounded aborigines unable to hold a footing. Beyond it others halted, appalled and hesitating. In that second of respite the trio of die-hards whipped fresh clips from their belts and reloaded. And beyond them the ragged bang of the repeaters steadily came nearer.

Out crashed the pistol chorus again. The naked brutes rising on the heaped bodies flopped down and stayed down. Those just beyond, flinching, falling, turned to flee. Shot in the back, half a score of them failed to reach cover. The remainder hurled themselves into the thicket and were gone.

"Wow! Hot dog!" Tim yelled hoarsely, his blue eyes darting all about. "They've took it on the run. Now, who's these other guys?"

The approaching force was not yet in sight, but it was coming faster and evidently sweeping all before it. The black-beard threw up his head and hurled a booming question into the red-spattered green:

"*Hola! Quién es?*"

Back came the answer in a piercing yell which carried like a bugle-call.

"José Martinez, *rey de Los Blancos!** *Quién es usted?*"

The three stood as if struck dumb. Slowly their heads turned, and they stared into one another's eyes. The firing had diminished to occasional scattered shots. From near at hand came sudden splashes, earthy thumps, rushing sounds among leaves,

*"King of the White Ones."

grunts and snarls of grappling antagonists. But within eyeshot of the two trees no man moved.

"Cr-r-ripes!" marveled Tim. "Hozy Marteeny, our ol' buddy! Wha'd'ye know!"

"*Quién es?*" came the sharp reiteration.

The tallest, his bleak face suddenly aglow, shouted back:

"McKay! Knowlton! Ryan! Over here!"

"*Quién? Válgame Dios!* My old comrades!" sounded an exultant yell.

Running feet padded. Then into the sight of the gun-fighters loped the Spaniard whose scout had speared the head-hunter.

To the eyes of strangers that figure erupting from the jungle would have been as grisly as that of a buccaneer attacking a town of the Spanish Main. Hair and mustachios abristle, face aflame with battle-lust, shirt and hairy chest splashed with sinister stains, heavy gun gripped in one fist and red-smeared machete in the other, he made a dire picture; and the appearance of the half-dozen followers who broke cover at his heels was hardly such as to inspire confidence in him or his intentions. Indians all, armed with spear and rifle, smeared with the blood of foemen or dripping from unheeded wounds of their own, hard-jawed and slit-eyed, they came on like merciless messengers of massacre. But at sight of those grim fighters the waiting trio broke into a roar of welcome.

"Hah! *Es verdad!* It is true!" yelled José, his teeth flashing. "My *compañeros* of the days gone by! *Bienvenido, camaradas*—welcome back! *Sangre de Cristo!* What a killing you have made here!"

HE HALTED outside the ring of dead, viewing in one astounded sweep of the eyes the execution done by the pistols. The Indians at his heels also stopped, staring first at the slain, then at the three between the trees, then around as if seeking more white men. Finding none, they muttered to one another and gazed wide-eyed at the gunmen who had wrought such havoc.

"Yeah! And now ye come hornin' in and bustin' up the game!" snorted Tim, his wide grin contradicting his growling tone. "Why didn't ye lay off a li'l longer, ye ol' crape-hanger, and leave us clean up right?"

He clambered across the human barrier as he spoke, right hand outstretched. Dropping his gun, José darted his own right forward. Palm slapped palm and fists closed in bone-crunching grips of amity.

"Pardon, Señor Tim," laughed the rescuer. "But I did not know who you were, and my men must have exercise. Now that I have spoiled your game you can join in mine, if you like—I am on my way to play with some Jiveros just beyond here. Ah, Capitán McKay!"

Wrenching his hand loose, he proffered it to the tall man, who now had come out and was standing with soldierly erectness. A quick, hearty handshake, a tight-lipped smile, and Captain McKay turned away unspeaking, his gray eyes searching the jungle and his pistol ready. The blond, slender Knowlton was the next and last to seize the powder-smutted hand of the "King of the White Ones."

"José, you're the toughest-looking angel I ever clapped an eye on," he declared, "but you're an angel just the same. We were about shot out."

"You are the first who ever called me so sweet a name, *teniente*," grinned the other. "But you mean you have no more cartridges? That is bad."

"No—we have some—didn't have time to open up the reserve. Got some here in a can—others in a cache up the Pastasa——"

"You came down the Pastasa? *Nombre de Dios!* That is a journey for men! But where are your packers? Killed?"

"Here's hopin' they are!" Tim broke in vengefully. "They turned yeller—quit us cold, away up-stream!"

"Ah," nodded José. "The old story. But come, I must move. Open your can quickly. Leave all else here. My men will return later."

The talk had been swift, each man keeping an ear open toward the fight, which seemed to be receding. Now Tim lunged over the barrier, shoved a couple of dead Jiveros aside, and lifted from the ground a heavy pack. Rapidly unstrapping it, he drew out a gallon kerosene tin, soldered air-tight, which he attacked with a machete, rising soon with hands full of flat pasteboard cartridge-boxes. Meanwhile José gave curt commands in some Indian tongue to the waiting half-dozen aborigines, who glanced at Tim's pack and at two others half-buried between the trees, then nodded.

"Here y' are, cap and looey."

Tim cast his handful of boxes at the pair

beyond, stooped, lifted the can and its remaining contents, and pitched it also at their feet. Gathering up the rifles, he floundered over to them. With fast-working fingers all reloaded their guns and replenished their depleted ammunition-belts. The extra cartridges then remaining went into pockets.

"All set. Where do we go from here?" demanded the florid Irishman.

"Follow," curtly answered José, gun again in hand.

At once he was off, his Indians close at his heels as before. The Americans loped in the rear, twitching their heavy belts to rest more comfortably across the hips.

Through the bewildering maze of buttressed trees, dangling *bejucos* and spreading fronds the short column advanced at its best speed; now swerving around a tree-butt, now hurdling a log, now stumbling over a contorted body nearly hidden in the undergrowth. The area of bullet-shredded leaves was left behind, but new corpses were met at frequent intervals—usually those of black-toothed Jiveros, but now and then that of a lighter-colored man of the jungle.

The fight had swept on in a series of individual combats among the forest ambushes, and now it was centering on some place close ahead. Gun-fire sounded, but only in infrequent shots punctuating a snarling rumble of voices—an inarticulate dissonance heavy with hatred. The enemy, scattered at first by the unexpected onslaught of José and his men, evidently had now drawn together and made a stand.

And so it proved. Suddenly the little column emerged into a clearing, in the middle of which stood a big pole-walled, palm-thatched house. Around this house raged a lethal mêlée. Here and there among the charred stumps studding the open space, light men and brown men grappled in small knots, stabbing, throttling, tumbling close-locked on the ground; but the main fight was along the walls of the tribal domicile. Clubs rose and battered down; red-dripping spears flew; machetes gleamed as their owners thrust, dodged, slashed; rifles and muskets bludgeoned out brains or belched a few bullets at close range. The place was a whirlpool of battling naked men.

"*Bueno!*" exulted José, after a keen look. "Aillu has not forgotten his plan, in spite of our fight back in the bush. He is a good *capitán*. Friend Tim, have you tobacco? I would smoke."

The Americans, seeking the best point to throw themselves into the fray, turned on him in astonishment. After his dash to reach the fight, he now stood like a mere spectator.

"What's stoppin' ye? Cold feet?" demanded the outspoken Tim.

José guffawed.

"Not so. My feet are most warm. But we are not needed there. My men can handle the little matter—and, as I said, I would smoke."

He motioned to the six Indians who had attended him unceasingly, and who now stood tense as chained dogs. The movement was only a wave of the hand toward the fight, but the warriors grinned as if given priceless rewards. With a simultaneous leap they sprinted toward their foes, howling like wolves as they sped. A moment later they were merged in the mass.

The three partners hesitated, watched the combat a moment longer, then relaxed. José had spoken truth. His followers had the upper hand. They had herded the Jiveros back against their own walls and were steadily cutting them down.

"Marvel of marvels! José Martinez neglecting a chance to fight!" said Knowlton, fishing a tobacco-pouch from a pocket and proffering it. "Never thought I'd live to see that. How come?"

"I have learned wisdom in my old age," chuckled the other. "I am not now José Martinez, Peruvian outlaw and lone bush-tramp, with only myself to think of when I fight. I am *El Rey*—King José, ruler of the White Ones of No Man's Land—and I must stand off and watch while my captains battle."

"Faith, ye look it, I don't think!" rumbled Tim. "Blood from hair to belt, ye are, and yer toad-stabber there is covered with it. Stand off and watch—huh! But what's this king stuff? Straight goods?"

"I am the king," was the simple answer.

Then, with a grin—

"And yet I have not a match, and without a match I do not smoke."

McKay, without taking his eyes from the fighting, passed over a little box of matches. José, igniting the tobacco which he had rolled in a thin slip of bark, took a lungful of smoke and exhaled rapturously. For

all his nonchalance, however, he was watching the mêlée like a cat.

For a few minutes nobody spoke. The struggling Indians heaved and struck, pitched outward or collapsed; the brown ones became fewer; the growling mob-voice gradually diminished. At length the light warriors began walking about in little knots, some limping, all looking for survivors to dispatch. Around the pole walls settled a quiet broken only by short questions and answers among the victors.

"An easy victory," coolly said King José. "I came with men enough to wipe out this whole nest of *salvajes*, but you had killed many before we arrived. That *capitán* Aillu of mine has a trick of surrounding which seldom fails—to attack with part of his men in front, more on the sides to close in behind——"

"An encircling movement," nodded McKay. "Good stuff if you have enough men. And those men of yours are bear-cats."

The Spaniard's eyes glowed.

"They are men," he asserted. "But come, let us enter our captured city and take our spoils—the heads and the women."

He began moving toward the house.

"Heads? Women?" ejaculated Knowlton. "Good Lord! You haven't taken up Jivero tricks, have you?"

The other gave him a quick glance, then smiled a hard smile.

"Come, *señores;* and you shall see," was his answer.

Looking queerly at him, the three silently followed.

CHAPTER III

MISSING

WITHIN the long house where, a few hours previously, the daily routine of a Jivero community had moved in its usual deliberate course, alien conquerors now rested after battle. Jiveros still were there, but they squatted in dumb submission, apparently apathetic regarding their fate. They were women and children. No male Jivero of fighting age remained alive.

In the middle of the big room three North Americans and a Spaniard sat side by side on a wide couch of bamboo strips, puffing at cigarets and scowling at a tall roof-pole. From that pole, hanging by long locks of hair, dangled a score of human heads.

They were not such heads, however, as one might perhaps expect to see immediately after a no-quarter fight between savage tribes; not freshly severed trophies of victory. There had been no mutilation of their fallen enemies by the White Ones of José. These horrid things were the handiwork of the men who now lay dead outside—of the Jiveros themselves.

Once they had been the heads of crafty creatures which prowled the vast wilderness of El Oriente; they had scowled, laughed, yawned, torn asunder with filed teeth the flesh of bird or beast; they had held the brains directing the movements of the strong bodies beneath. Now they were uncanny masks, no larger than apples, their tiny eyes shut, their lips sewed with cotton cords which hung down like grisly white beards. Within them were no tongues, no brains, no skulls. Little leering faces and hanks of hair—nothing more.

Somberly regarding them, the red and the blond man twitched their shoulders as if chilly. The faces of the two tall black-haired men were unreadable.

"Urrrgh!" muttered Tim. "If ye hadn't come 'long when ye did, Hozy, we might have looked like these things in—how long's it take?"

"About forty-eight hours, I think," answered José, without looking at him. "The skull is taken out by slitting the scalp from neck to crown, and then the skin is sewed up and put into a cone-shaped pot of water. The water is heated almost to boiling, so that the head will cook without scalding. Then hot sand is put in at the neck-hole, and at the same time the outside is rubbed with smooth hot stones. As soon as the sand cools, more hot sand is put in. And so it goes on, the sanding and the smoothing and moving the head about, until it is shrunk evenly to the smallest size. Then it is smoked, and it is done. The *diablos!* A million curses on all their race!"

He sprang up suddenly, hurling his cigaret to the ground. With long, swift strides he paced up and down, watched intently by his own men, his newly arrived friends, and his prisoners. After a few minutes he sat down as abruptly as he had risen.

"Got some friends of yours, maybe?" suggested Knowlton.

"*Sí!* One friend who——"

His teeth clicked shut. Presently he went on:

"But no more of that now. Aillu! Curac!"

From the ranks of the men resting on the beds of their late foes, dressing wounds or talking quietly among themselves, came two soft-striding warriors of muscular build and mature years. One was the chief with whom José had conversed during the halt at the tree of the devil-dreamer—a gaunt-cheeked, hard-jawed, deep-eyed man; the other, more chunky of build and broad of face, with a wide mouth lifted into a perpetual half-smile by a long scar down one cheek.

"Aillu, chief of the White Ones of the Curaray side of my cordillera," explained José, nodding toward the first, "and Curac, leader of Los Blancos of the Pastasa side. Each is a *capitán*, and a good one."

With no change of tone, he spoke briefly in the Indian tongue. Aillu returned to his men. Curac monotoned a dozen words, and a dozen fighters arose with spears in hand and went out. Curac himself advanced on the prisoners and grunted a few times. Women and children arose, filed through a small doorway in a partition of *cana brava* behind them, and shut the door.

"The men of Curac guard the outer door of the women's quarters until midnight," José went on. "Then the men of Aillu relieve them. In the morning we all march, and this place goes up in smoke."

"What about the women?" curtly asked McKay.

The Spaniard smiled grimly.

"The women trouble you, yes? Learn, then, that they go to a better life than they have ever known. They go as slaves, but they never have been anything else——"

"As slaves of whom?" McKay persisted.

"Of me and my people, *capitán*. And now that I think of it, I must no longer call you *capitán*—I use that name for Aillu and Curac and others. Did not the Señor Knowlton call you 'Rod' in other days?"

"Yes. Name's Roderick McKay."

"Rod — Rodereeck — Rodrigo. Señor Rodrigo it shall be."

"Omit the *señor*."

"As you say," laughed José. "But the women—they have been only slaves to murderers. Perhaps you do not know the Jivero wife-custom? When a girl becomes of the mating age—that is to say, about twelve years—her father gives her as wife to some friend or makes some young man work several months for her. But the man who first gets her may not live long. If he has two or three strong, good-looking wives, some other Jivero kills him—yes, even one of his own neighbors, perhaps. Then the women are those of the new man until he also is killed. By the time she is old, a woman may belong to six or more killers in turn, and see the heads of her dead mates shrunken like these."

He gestured toward the dangling masks.

"Perhaps, since she has no love for her master in the beginning, she is glad to exchange him for a new one now and then," he added, with a slight grin. "But, whether she likes him or not, she is only a slave."

"So you keep her a slave," said Knowlton.

His tone was matter-of-fact, but in it the other detected a caustic undernote which made him glance sidelong at the clear-cut blond profile.

"Just so, *señor*," was the cool rejoinder. "What else? Should I slaughter these women? Or turn them into the jungle to die? Or, perhaps, carry them to other Jiveros and say, 'Here are new slaves for you—make them breed more murderous shrinkers of heads to destroy me and my White Ones'? Hah! Not I!"

Knowlton flushed slightly, drew the last puff from his cigaret, and dropped the butt. Without reply, he ran his eyes again over the heads.

"Wal, say, Hozy," interposed Tim, "mebbe ye're right, at that, though I don't mind tellin' ye this slave stuff o' yourn don't make no big hit with us. But about these here, now, Jivero heads—there ain't no more round the house nowheres?"

"These are all, Señor Tim. My men brought to this pole all they found. They are not in the habit of overlooking anything."

"What about them bark baskits hangin' off the poles up above? What's in them?"

"Food, hung up to protect it from ants and other crawling things."

"Oh. And ye say these shrunk-up heads are like life? Ye could reckernize a feller ye knowed?"

"You have said it."

The three American faces relaxed a little. Tim took a long breath.

"Good 'nough. There ain't no white man's head here, then. Le's lookit somethin' else a while. Say, these are a funny kind o' bunks, now, ain't they? I thought everybody round here slept in hammicks.

Bet ye could sleep three men easy in every bunk."

The others cast perfunctory glances at the couch on which they sat—a lattice-work of bamboo strips and interlaced cords, within a pole frame.

"Six or more," corrected José. "They sleep in a row, with feet on that pole rail out there, and a smoky fire under the legs to keep off the mosquitoes. You spoke of a white man's head, *amigo*. Did you expect to find one here?"

"Wal, no—we was afraid we might, that's all. We hope we don't find it in no such place as this here, but we—uh—we're lookin' round. It's Dave Rand. Ye remember him."

THERE was a silence. Thoughtfully José picked up Knowlton's tobacco-pouch, lying beside him, and made a new cigaret. For a time he puffed at it with-out speaking.

"Rand," he mused at length. "Rand, your friend and mine. I have not forgotten.

"It was he who first brought you three into this part of the world. He had disappeared while traveling in Brazil, and you three came to find him. And you found him alive, but crazed by a bullet, among the cannibals of the Rio Javary, in Brazil. And you cured his craziness by hitting him over the head with a gun— Hah! many a time I have thought about that—and then we four brought him out to the Amazon, and you sailed away.

"And then, a year later, the four of you came back to hunt gold. And I chanced to meet you at the mouth of the Tigre Yacu, where I too was bound on a gold-hunt. And we went into the Cordillera del Pastasa and found our treasure. But it took a *temblor*—an earthquake—to reveal it and to help us kill the Jiveros who had swarmed in to take our heads. And Señor Dave, always silent, but always seeing everything—how he fought those accursed ones! He was caught among falling stones, too, and lived only by a miracle of luck. Has his luck failed, now that he has made a fortune?"

He flashed a glance at the others, then looked at his cigaret.

"We're afraid so, José," Knowlton admitted. "It's like this:

"We four got home all right, and after we whacked up our fortune into four equal parts we sort of scattered. Each of us had a different idea about what he wanted to do, and so each went his own way for a while, though we kept more or less in touch with one another. Rod here has some relatives in Scotland, so he went over to visit them and then drifted down into Africa a while. I wanted to see some of the big outdoor parts of the States and Canada where I hadn't been, and I rambled all around seeing them. Tim wanted to stay in New York, so he stayed, and hit a little hard luck. And while we——"

"Aw, tell it right," morosely interjected Tim. "Hard luck? I was jest a dumb fool. I got an idee, Hozy, I was goin' to be a fynanseer—a guy that invests his dough in stocks and bonds and such-like and makes a lot more money and gits to be a wallopin' big toad all round. And I went down in Wall Street and bought, and made some profit, and bought some more, and got real int'rested in the game. And then a guy that had been steerin' me round says, why am I satisfied with small stuff—why not git into the game right and be a broker, with him for a pardner, me puttin' up the dough and him runnin' the works, seein' he knowed the game better'n I did. And I fell for it. And it run along and things was goin' swell, and then the bottom dropped out and he dropped out with it, and they ain't found him yet. It was some pardnership, I'll say—he was the broker and I was the broke."

José stared in a puzzled way. McKay, eyes twinkling, enlightened him.

"Tim gambled and lost."

"Oh. A-ha! A North American gambling game, yes? I do not know that game. And the other man cheated?"

"I'll say so! 'Tain't so much losin' yer money that hurts—it's bein' played for a sucker and knowin' ye been rooked, and bein' give the razz by everybody that's been tumblin' over themselves to be friends with ye. One day ye're "Mister Ryan, sir,' and the next ye're 'that thick mick.' Aw wal, it's all in the game, I s'pose. But if I ever git holt o' that pardner o' mine——"

He paused, his big hands curling into fists and his mouth becoming a thin line. José nodded and significantly slipped a finger across his jugular.

"Aw, no. Ye can't do it that way up there. Ye git sent to the chair if ye do, no matter how ornery the guy was. But

I'll jest show the gent a few li'l' tricks I learnt while we was buckin' the Hindenburg line in France. Grrrumph!"

With an inarticulate growl he subsided.

Presently Knowlton resumed his interrupted narrative.

"Well, as I was saying, while we were enjoying ourselves in our various ways Dave was doing likewise, only in a different manner. He'd traveled so much in his younger days that he didn't care about drifting around, so he stayed in New York. He got in with some scientific societies, and he wrote a number of articles that created quite a commotion in those circles; facts about the South American Indians that nobody knew before, and about the psychological effects of jungle life on civilized man, and such things. And then he developed a hobby for ethnology—the study of human races and their customs, you know. That led him into the question of how these Jiveros shrink their heads, and why they shrink them, and who the Jiveros really are, and so on.

"Something about those things is known in the States—some of these shrunken heads are in a museum in New York, along with a couple made by the Mundurucu Indians of the Rio Tapajoz, in Brazil, down the Amazon; the Mundurucu heads are not so good, by the way. But there's a great deal more that isn't known, and there's even some dispute as to how the shrinking is done. The upshot of all this was that Dave decided to come in here and see for himself."

José slowly, silently shook his head.

"That's what we're afraid of, too," nodded Knowlton. "That he'll never come back. He's been gone a year now. He didn't let us know—just packed up and went, according to that quiet habit of his. We were drifting around, as I've said, and we didn't get together again until about three months ago. Then, when we tried to locate Dave for a little reunion dinner, we learned of what he'd done. We talked it over, and—here we are."

Again José contemplated his cigaret, which had gone out.

"I see," he said after a pause. "Where was Señor Dave last seen?"

"At Ambato. He came in from the Pacific side, via Guayaquil. We followed the same route and found officials who remembered he had started down the Pastasa. Neither he nor his Quichua packers have come back. So we came down the Pastasa too."

"And how did you reach this place?"

"Here? Well, we railed it to Pelileo, end of the line; horsed it along the Pastasa cañon nearly to Mera; legged it along the Puyo trail to Canelos, on the Rio Bobonaza. Couldn't go straight down the Pastasa from Mera, of course, because nothing can go through the rapids there and live; so we had to make the detour via Canelos. Canelos is controled by priests, and because we didn't choose to tell all our business they decided we were gold-hunters and made things hard. Our Quichua packers quit us there in the night, and the *padres* blocked us from getting any local Indians. The only way we could even get a canoe was by seizing one. Had too much duffle, so we cached everything we couldn't pack ourselves—left it on a hill-top about a day below Canelos. Then we came down the Bobonaza to the Pastasa.

"Well, we'd heard that at the mouth of the Bobonaza was a *varadero*—a portage-trail—that ran across to the Curaray. We didn't know whether you were still around here or not, but we figured that if you were you'd be up along the Cordillera del Pastasa somewhere and we might find you by taking that trail; so we looked for it. But we didn't find it. Is there one?"

"*Sí*. But unless one knows just where to look for it he may pass it twenty times without seeing it."

"Well, we missed it. So then we figured our best bet would be to cut west instead of east and try to hit the pueblo of Macas, on the Morona. The Riobamba folks told us some of the Jiveros sometimes traded at Macas, and that seemed likely to be the best place to get a line on Dave. As near as we could figure it out from the rotten map we've got, it was about a hundred miles air-line to the *pueblo*—meaning two hundred, the way you have to worm around down here. So we bucked into the bush yesterday morning, heading due west by compass. Then this afternoon we ran plumb into this Jivero gang. You know the rest."

His matter-of-fact recital brought an appreciative grin to the brooding face of the jungle-roving commander of Los Blancos.

"You speak of it as nothing," he chuckled. "Few men would have dared to come on

after being deserted by their Indians—few would have dared even to start down the Pastasa! And of those few almost none would have attempted to cross this Cordillera de Upanos into the Morona country, where *los infieles* let no man pass. That town of Macas, of which you speak—just across the river from that place, three hundred years ago, was the fine Spanish city of Sevilla de Oro. What is Sevilla de Oro now? A name—a tale—nothing more! The Jiveros stormed it—destroyed it and all its men—carried away the wives and babes of those Spaniards and made Jiveros of them. And from that day to this no white man may pass through the country of the rivers Morona or Santiago or Pastasa. You know it well. Yet you try to do that which cannot be done—for nothing but to find a lost comrade."

"Well, we told you when we last saw you that we might come back some day looking for excitement," the blond man hastily retorted, as if not relishing an accusation of sentiment. "Life up home is so blooming civilized and law-ridden that it palls on a fellow sometimes."

"But you would not have come unless Señor Dave had come."

"Maybe not. Not just now, anyhow. You've heard nothing about him?"

José did not answer at once. Then his reply was—

"I have not once heard his name since he and you left me on the Tigre Yacu."

With that he abruptly arose, and as abruptly changed the subject.

"I have hunger. Let us eat of the food which our Jivero hosts so kindly gathered for us. Curac!"

Curac came, received orders, went to the women's door, and threw it open. In response to his gruff grunts women stolidly entered, freshened fires, and began preparing meals from the contents of the rafter-hung baskets.

At that moment one of the guards came through the outer doorway and cat-footed up to his commander-in-chief. A few words passed. Then, preceded by the warrior, José went outside.

The eyes of the Americans dwelt for a grave interval on the little heads which had once been those of men; then they turned to one another.

"Hozy acts funny. Dang funny!" rumbled Tim.

Short nods agreed. Then all stared again at the heads.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRIESTESS OF PIATZO

BEFORE the silent three loomed a spear-bearing warrior; a tall young fellow who spoke no word, but whose clear eyes looked steadily into theirs. McKay lifted his brows. With a wave of the free hand, the newcomer gestured toward the entrance.

"*El rey?*" queried Knowlton.

A nod was the answer. Without waiting, the man turned and swung doorward. The Americans rose and followed him.

Down one wall the guide led them, halting at a doorway before which stood the guards watching the women. There, without entering, he gestured toward the interior. The three glanced inside, saw only dimness, and looked back at the Indian in some perplexity. Again he motioned them within.

"Looks as if we were invited into the harem," commented Knowlton. "Here goes, anyway."

And he sauntered through the small opening. At once, from somewhere beyond, sounded the voice of José.

"Enter, comrades. The fool should have brought you through the partition, instead of around the house; but an Indian follows his habits unless told otherwise. Come and see a Jivero prize more handsome than those devil-heads."

Trooping inward, they saw him standing near a tiny fire. Beyond, statesque and still, stood a woman alone. Farther back, sullenly silent, was gathered a group of Jivero women, snakily watching the pair near the fire.

"Wow! Some pippin!" muttered Tim, as his eyes adjusted themselves to the subdued light. "Leave it to Hozy to find gold in a mud-hole! He never misses."

By comparison with the others of her sex, the lone woman, softly illumined by the fire-glow, seemed fair indeed. Not only was she far lighter than they, but her oval face was more clear-cut and much more intelligent than their heavy visages. Her figure, too, though partly concealed by a simple sleeveless gown caught together over the right shoulder, was taller and more slender than their stocky frames. In her poise was

an unconscious dignity, a suggestion of self-reliance and aloofness, markedly at variance with the slouching attitudes of the unkempt females behind her. This was no stolid Jivero woman, accustomed since girlhood to being merely the creature of one murderer after another.

As the battle-stained North Americans paused beside José and stared at her, she glanced from man to man with a swift sweep of the eyes that seemed to see all. A fleeting gleam of interest lit up her face and was as quickly gone. Then her dark eyes dwelt again on José; and, with the same calm poise, she seemed to await speech.

"More of the spoils of war, king?" dryly asked Knowlton.

"Something of the sort," nodded José. "A most unexpected treasure to find in such a place as this, yes? And now that we have her, what shall we do with her? It is a pity that I already have nine wives, who probably would kill her if I made her the tenth—for she is not of their family or their tribe, and they are jealous of outsiders. But you, my friends, have not even one wife among you. Shall I present her to you? Or will you draw lots to see who shall have her?"

McKay frowned slightly. Knowlton, after a quizzical glance, smiled as if at an obvious jest. Tim alone felt called on to answer:

"If we didn't know ye so well, ye danged ol' pirate, we might think ye meant it. And ye know us well enough to know we fight shy o' women. Women was only invented to git men into trouble, anyways, and us three can find plenty o' trouble without help. But say, this here li'l lady is sure easy to look at. If she ain't white, she's so near it I can't see the difference. Who is she?"

"She says her name is Nuné, and that she is Indian. Yet she speaks Spanish very well, and I think her blood is nearly pure Spanish. She is a prisoner, just brought from the country of the Huambizas, away to the southeast, where a war-party from this place has just been on a raid. The Huambizas, as you perhaps know, are the fiercest tribe of all the Jivero nation, and the men from here had bad fortune in attacking them—they brought back only three heads and this one woman.

"That may be the reason why they were so vicious in fighting you today, though no Jivero needs a reason to be murder-mad. I have learned nothing more from her—she thinks before she speaks, and then says little. But later she will find time to talk. She marches with us tomorrow, like the rest."

To the woman he said:

"Stay here. Do not try to escape in the night. My men watch."

She made no reply; only regarded him steadily. He turned and walked toward the partition. Tim and Knowlton lounged after him. Then McKay spoke—

"Better separate her from the other women for the night, José."

The Spaniard whirled, shot a glance at the tall Scot, and followed his gaze to the Jivero women. Their lowering expressions boded no good.

"Ah! *Sí*, I think you have it right. Before morning she might become silent forever. Nuné! *Aquí!*"

At his imperative gesture she moved obediently forward—still mute, still regarding her new masters with unperturbed serenity, and seeming to glide rather than to walk. The Jivero women, standing like wooden figures, watched in sour silence. José resumed his way doorward, the girl drifting behind him with the same smooth grace. The North Americans trailed after her.

"Gee, there's real class to the kid," Tim admired. "Git the set o' that head, will ye? Carries herself like a million dollars. I've seen many a dame on Fifth Av'noo that could take lessons in walkin' from this here li'l wild woman. Wha'd ye say her name was, kink? Noony?"

The girl's head turned, and her deep eyes looked inquiringly into Tim's blue ones. Those Irish eyes twinkled straight back at her, and on the wide red-bearded mouth grew a contagious smile. For an instant she seemed to search his mind. Then a tiny smile flitted across her own lips, and she faced forward again.

"Nuné," corrected José, without glancing back.

"Noonay? Noonay. Kind o' musical, at that. I like it."

"He's off again, Rod," Knowlton muttered, with pretended secrecy. "After those wise cracks he just made about women, one smiles at him and he falls like a ton of coal."

"Grrrumph!" responded Tim. "Don't git jealous, looey. Mebbe she'll smile at you too, bimeby. And about them wise cracks—

I've took another look since then. And about me fallin'—I've fell before, but I always lit on me feet."

Wherewith he drowned all retorts by howling at the top of his voice:

"Me wi-yuld I-yuh-rish ro-hose!
The swee-test flow'r that gro-hows!
Ye kin search ev'ry-whay-uhr
But none kin com-pay-uhr
With me wi-i-i——"

"Ugh! Glug-glug-oof!"

The bawl was cut short by Knowlton's arm, thrust under the songster's jaw and clamped tight with choking force. Gurgling, wheezing, Tim lurched through the doorway into the men's room, trying to heave his blond partner over his head. Failing, he clutched the strangling forearm with both big fists and wrenched it away.

"Let the rest of it die, or else take it out and sing it to the other howling monkeys!" commanded his silencer. "That voice of yours sounds like a saw going through a pine-knot, and we've had enough agony for one day. Besides, you're scaring your new girl."

Tim, about to launch a belligerent reply, gulped and glanced at Nuné. Around the room, weary warriors had started up at the commotion and stood poised, some grasping spears. But Tim saw only the girl, who was staring at him. Whatever he might have intended to say or do was knocked out of his mind by two words from her.

"*Está loco?*" she quietly asked José. "He is crazy?"

"*Sí!*" instantly responded the satirical conqueror. "He has a demon."

THE effect of the jest was most unexpected. Knowlton and McKay, as was natural, chuckled at Tim's black scowl toward José, and the king cackled over his own joke. But Nuné neither smiled nor shrank away in superstitious fear. Her left hand slipped within the robe drawn diagonally across her breast; came out again, and poised before her lips. In her fingers now shone a small gold cross.

While smiles faded and eyes opened, she moved slowly toward Tim, her gaze dwelling steadfastly on him. In tones low but resonant she murmured words which meant nothing to the white men, yet which conveyed the solemnity of an exorcism. Utter silence gripped the house; the white men standing motionless, the fierce warriors seeming to hold their breath, the brown women staring dumbly at this new thing. And Nuné, her clear face and deep eyes alight with lofty purpose, came to a pause within arm's length of the red-headed man and became silent in her turn. For a long minute the tense stillness held. Then she drifted back from him; the gold cross slipped within her robe and was gone; and she said simply, in Spanish—

"You are well."

At that moment, somewhere in the near-by jungle, broke out the discordant roars of a howling-monkey—as if the savage wilderness were voicing derision of human faiths. Tim blinked, rubbed a hand across his eyes and stared again at Nuné. A hum of muttered words rose from the warriors. The white men relaxed and watched the girl glide back to her former place near José.

"Well!" exclaimed Knowlton. "What sort of hocus-pocus do you call that?"

"Grrrumph! 'Tain't no hocus-pocus, ye ignorant Protestant," retorted Tim, still eying the girl. "This here Hozy—the grinnin' baboon—told her I had a divil, and she took it serious and tried to drive it out o' me. She must be a woman priest or somethin'."

"Your pardon, friend Tim, but it was not I who made her think you mad," José sardonically corrected. "It was yourself, with that fearful howl of yours. And, *por Dios*, if it is not a demon that forces you to yell in that way, I do not know what it is. My men here were almost ready to stab you."

"For which I don't blame them," affirmed McKay.

Tim snorted, but said no more. As the four moved to the spot where their delayed meal awaited them, all studied Nuné with new curiosity but without questions. Further talk could wait until sharp appetites were appeased. Behind them, still dutifully following as she had been bidden, the strange girl came, watching the muscular man whose "demon" she had just expelled.

Where they had recently sat, a new fire now burned; and beside it stood the scarred chief, Curac, directing the labors of several women prisoners as efficiently as if the meal of his king were as important as a battle. Game, freshly killed by the now-dead Jivero men, had been collected from various parts of the tribe-house and now was broiling;

fruits had been brought, and great clay jars of water stood ready.

With one accord the whites bathed, and with keen relish they attacked the viands. José, by a wordless gesture, indicated that Nuné was to share in the feast; and, squatting with the lithe ease of a true Indian, she ate eagerly. From time to time her eyes encountered Tim's, but now they regarded him as impersonally as any of his mates.

When the meal was ended, night had come. The packs of the Americans had been brought in and unobtrusively deposited near them. Curac had sent men to relieve the guards at the women's entrance, and posted others at the men's door as night sentries. The serving-women were banished to their quarters, and, in all the room occupied by the fighters, no woman remained save Nuné. Through the smoke of a new cigaret José quizzically regarded her.

"Let me see your cross," he commanded.

She hesitated, searching his eyes. Then she drew out the gold symbol, but did not remove its slender cord from around her neck. José reached, took it—not irreverently—in his palm, weighed and scrutinized it, and gave it back to her.

"Pure gold," he judged, "and made in a rough clay mold by one not skilled at such work."

Then, in Spanish—

"From what place did you obtain this?"

She made no reply.

"Answer!" snapped her inquisitor. "Answer, or I give you as slave to—to these three."

He jerked his head toward the bearded foreigners.

"Aw say, Hozy, give the kid a chance—" began Tim.

But Nuné interrupted him. Rising, she spoke, calmly as ever—

"If Piatzo wills that Nuné be a slave, it is well."

"*Sí?*" jeered José. "And why should Piatzo care for what happens to you?"

"Nuné is the servant of Piatzo. Unless Piatzo so wills, no man nor beast can harm her."

The King of the White Ones sat silent, drawing again at his cigaret. At a word from him, those warriors of his would have speared her without compunction. But he did not speak any such word. He only eyed her shrewdly. Then he answered:

"*Bien.* Soon Piatzo will command you to speak and tell me all. Until that time you shall go safely and be protected from all evil. Now rest through the night on that bed."

He pointed to a bamboo couch just beyond.

"It is well."

She turned, lay down on the designated couch and was still.

"Oh-ho!" yawned José, stretching himself. "*Tengo sueño*—I am sleepy. It has been a long day. Good night, friends."

"Wait a minute," remonstrated Knowlton. "What does all this mean? Who's Piatzo, and so on?"

"Piatzo is the Great Father—*Dios*—God. Tim had it right; this woman is a priestess, though I never before knew of such a one. She does not feel like talking now, and so she believes Piatzo does not will her to talk—and she would not talk even if tortured. So we should be fools to waste more time on her tonight. When she is moved to speak freely—as she probably will be when she becomes better acquainted with us—I think we shall learn much."

He yawned again, and curled up on his couch. The others finished their smokes and did likewise. Silence, broken from time to time only by the quiet freshening of the little mosquito-smudges glowing here and there, settled on the house which last night had sheltered murderous savages, tonight protected their conquerors and the strange priestess of Piatzo, and tomorrow would vanish from the face of the earth.

CHAPTER V

JUNGLE JUSTICE

IN THE misty half-light of a new dawn, men moved slowly along the outer wall of the tribe-house, piling wood. Day had not yet come; in fact, the surrounding jungle still was the abode of dense gloom, and even in the clearing all was vague. But the silent warriors laying those piles moved as easily as if under a brilliant sun, and with a sureness indicating that they had done such work before. These were the men of Aillu—the last relief of the night watch, now finishing their tour of duty by preparing to destroy the house which they had guarded.

At half a score of places they built up those slanting heaps of light, tindery dry stuff, reaching to the palm thatch. Meanwhile, within the house, other warriors

lounged and watched the women prisoners revive the cooking-fires and make ready for the morning meal. In the center of the room, their king and his friends likewise sat at ease beneath the pole on which dangled the little leering heads. Four young Jivero women were sluggishly at work at the royal fire.

"Wal, cap," yawned Tim, "it's movin'-day again, as usual. Where do we go from here?"

McKay's eyes lifted to the heads, then swung to José.

"See here, José," he said curtly. "We're here to find Dave. You know something, and you're holding back. Is he dead or alive?"

The other met his gaze defiantly.

"I do not know, *cap*—Rodrigo."

A moment's silence. McKay's gray scrutiny probed the brown eyes. Not a lash flickered.

"If you don't know, what do you suspect?"

The Spaniard shrugged.

"Suspicions are not knowledge. I may suspect many things, and all of them may be far from the truth. In other years I acted often on what I suspected, without waiting to know; and I made mistakes. Now that I have more ways of gathering knowledge, I do not trust so readily in suspicions."

"Which doesn't answer my question."

"True. And, with your pardon, I shall not answer it until any suspicion which I now may have shall become more strong."

For no apparent reason, he glanced at Nuné, who was watching the colloquy.

"Until that time—and it may not be long—I shall be much honored if you will visit my little camp in the eastern hills. I return there today."

The three frowned thoughtfully. McKay, in fact, scowled as if angered by the other's evasions. Then Knowlton said:

"We'd sure like to do that, old-timer, and we will—when we've located Dave. But right now——"

"I understand, *amigo*," smiled José. "Yet are you not foolish? Remember that you know nothing of where Señor Dave is; that there is no good reason to suppose him to be at Macas; that if you three go on alone, you will almost certainly meet with more such men as you met yesterday, and that you cannot forever go blundering about this region and winning fights.

"At my camp we may all learn much more quickly what we wish to know, and then we can act with sense and force. I cannot go farther westward now, because I am not equipped for a long trail; this raid to this place was a personal matter, and now that my purpose is fulfilled I go back. Later—perhaps very soon—we all may come westward again and succeed. I know that when you three have once set your faces forward you go on in spite of death and the devil, but this time you would be fools to refuse to turn back."

"True enough. We would," conceded McKay. "But that wouldn't stop us from going ahead if we had anything to go on. Look here, José. This 'personal matter' of yours had nothing to do with Dave?"

"Not at all. Some of my scouts who came here on a spying trip found the head of an old friend of mine—a Spaniard of Iquitos." His brow darkened as he glanced at the diabolical dolls on the pole. "A real friend—a true friend—the only friend of my own race I have ever known since I fled from Peru. How he came to die in this place I do not know. But my men stole the head and brought it to me, and I came here to settle the score of my friend. It is well paid. Now, as I was saying, you will come and visit me. Let us eat and go."

He gestured to one of the women. She began slopping portions of warmed-up stew—left over from the night meal—into clay bowls. The Northerners, who had watched him sharply while he explained his presence at this place, relaxed.

"Faith," chuckled Tim, "don't the ol' scalawag put on the dog, though! 'Ye'll do this,' says he, and us hard-boiled guys jest do it. Aw wal, Hozy, ye're dead right. We'll likely git ahead quicker by walkin' backward awhile— Huh? What ye say, Noony?"

Nuné had swiftly risen and caught his hand, into which one of the servants had passed a bowl.

"*Cuidado!* Take care!" she warned.

Then, turning swiftly to José—

"It is well to let these eat first."

With the words she gestured toward the Jivero cooks.

"Ah. *Sí?*" The Spaniard's face darkened again. "You speak well. We shall see."

Harshly then he ground out several Indian words at the nearest woman, at the same time shoving toward her a bowl which

she had handed him. The words apparently were unintelligible to her, but his hard face and his action made words unnecessary. Fear glinted in her shallow eyes. She took a backward step.

José shot to full height, seized her shoulder, brought the bowl to her lips. With an animal-like moan, she clamped her mouth tight and writhed to break free. Stark terror now was stamped plain on every feature.

"So!" hissed José.

He hurled the dish to the hard-packed earth, where it smashed.

"Aillu!"

Aillu appeared as if at one bound. Half a dozen alert warriors followed him. A wrathful command from José, a gruff grunt from Aillu, and the women were dragged aside.

"What's the row?" demanded Knowlton.

"These snake-women have poisoned our food!" José snapped. "The toads! By all jungle law I should kill the four of them at once. But I am too much of a fool. Yet there are other punishments— Hah! Yes. I shall reward them fittingly within the hour. *Sí!*"

His teeth flashed in a mirthless grin. Then, turning to the girl, he added in a different tone—

"Nuné, how did you know?"

"They brought dark roots hidden in their hands," she quietly informed him. "They dropped them into the pot. You talked and did not see."

"We were blind fools," he acknowledged. "And we owe you a reward. What thing do you most desire?"

"Nuné would return to her own people."

"Ah. But the way is long and you are alone."

"It does not matter."

"You would not live to make the journey, girl."

"With the hand of Piatzo to lead me I should live."

"Hm!" José cogitated, watching her. Then he nodded shortly. "You shall have your wish. You shall return to your own people. But first you shall march with us a few days toward the rising sun."

"It is well."

She sank back on her couch, letting her eyes drift from man to man, then serenely gazing beyond them. José picked up a fagot and shoved the pot from the fire, overturning it. After poking a minute among the spilled chunks of meat and yuca, he grunted and picked up a small brownish thing resembling a wet roll of tobacco.

"She speaks truth," he said. "Here is one poison-root. Comrades, shall we make a new meal here, or ——"

"Not me, by cripes!" vowed Tim. "I lost me appetite. Let's hit the trail and kill somethin' clean to eat. This here dump goes against me stummick."

"Same here," seconded Knowlton.

McKay nodded, adding—

"Your men all right?"

José swiftly scanned the place.

"I think so. But ——"

Raising his voice, he rapped out a command. Men who were eating stopped. Others, about to begin, shoved their food from them. Another curt order, and all began picking up weapons.

"We go," added José. "I myself am no longer hungry. We shall eat on the trail. No, do not burden yourselves with your packs. Our prisoners are as strong as men, and they shall do men's work—to make them forget poisonous thoughts. Carry only your guns."

A FEW more words to Aillu, and that saturnine chieftain strode to the doorway leading into the women's quarters. In a couple of minutes he was back with six stockily-built women, who brought with them large circular baskets to which were attached broad bark head-straps.

Among these six was divided the equipment of the three North Americans; and when the baskets were loaded the women slung them on their backs with an ease bespeaking long usage to weightier burdens. Other women followed, some laden with similar baskets containing food, others carrying babies, and still others with nothing at all. Herded by the warriors, they filed through the outer entrance. Last in line, and separated from the rest by a special guard of the men of Aillu, passed the four who had dropped the poison-roots into the pot.

"We go," repeated José, picking up his rifle. Then, glancing for the last time at the little heads clustered on the pole— "*Adios*, you who were men!"

And he turned his back on them and swung doorward.

Outside, the sun now was shooting long

rays athwart the clearing. Around the house already stood men holding torches taken from the fires. José glanced about and spoke one word—

"Burn!"

He walked away among the stumps, heading toward the sun. The human herd moved with him, the North Americans alone looking back. They saw the fire-bearers kindle the piles they had placed; saw the flames crawl rapidly to the eaves, smoulder in the damp thatch, and begin to creep upward and aside. Then, stumbling over roots or bumping against stumps, they had to watch their footing.

At the edge of the trees all paused. José keenly surveyed the doomed house and nodded. Under a growing cloud of black smoke the flames now were eating swiftly toward the peak from all sides of the structure, drying out the thick leaf-layers and converting them into tinder. In a few more minutes the place would be a raging furnace.

"*Bueno!* And now to reward our gentle friends who so love the brown roots. You have wondered, *amigos*, what I would do with them? You shall see; and see also how queer is the mind of a woman. Their punishment is to do only what they most wanted to do—to remain here."

At his command, the guilty four were brought to him. Briefly, harshly, he spoke in a jargon unknown to the Northerners. Curac, standing beside him, translated in a growling tone. A minute passed, while the minds of the women grasped his meaning. Then their faces turned gloomy. Gloom became fear. One spoke, thrusting her chin toward the others who bore packs, while her tone became a whine. A curt refusal from José stopped her. A few more incisive words, another translation by Curac, and the four shrank back and walked miserably away.

"You see, *amigos*. They now wish to be slaves: to go with the other women, not to be left alone. Though they tried to poison us, I do not kill them, nor even whip them. Yet they are not satisfied. It is true that they are left without home, without men, without weapons, to await whatever may happen to them; but they have their plantation to give them food, and liberty to do whatever they will—except to follow us. And because they cannot follow us, they are not content."

Knowlton eyed him and glanced at the four condemned to abandonment.

"Well, but here, José, what will become of them?"

"How do I know? That is for the jungle to decide. Perhaps, in time, Jivero men will chance on them and give them new slavery; perhaps some other fate will come to them. I have nothing to do with that. I go, and leave them free and well and strong. I only tell them that they must not follow, and that if they do they will be dealt with according to their own law—the Jivero law for women who disobey their masters."

"And what's that?" demanded McKay.

"A woman who fights, or who refuses to go with a new master, dies the death of a man; and her head is shrunk like that of a man. A woman who tricks her master for another man has a spear run through her and is spiked to the earth. There are other little penalties, too, for disobedience—such as slowly chopping out all the hair by the roots—which are not pleasant. No, they will not follow us. They know their law."

"Seems a bit rough to leave them at the mercy of the jungle, though," Knowlton grumbled. "Why not take them along, now that you've scared them well?"

"Ho! And have it known to all my people that an attempt to poison me and my comrades went unpunished? *Por Dios!* What is that but an invitation to all the world to kill me? You have been too long away from the jungle, friend, and grown soft. Let no more be said. We go."

He looked again at the house, now bursting into complete conflagration; signaled to his captains, and turned away from Jivero stronghold and Jivero assassins. Headed by a handful of scouts, the line began to file into the forest: Aillu and his men in the vanguard, the prisoners following, and the force of Curac falling in after them. José waited.

"Wal, speakin' for Timmy Ryan," the red-headed man vouchsafed, "the —— can fly away with anybody that tries poisonin' me, whether it's man, woman, or child. The only difference between them women and four snakes is in their shape, and I never seen you guys ask a snake whether 'twas a he or a she before ye killed it. Me, I think Hozy's lettin' 'em down easy. Come on, let's go. No packs or nothin' to carry today, and a young army o' hard guys

to break trail for us—this is what I call reg'lar travelin', if ye ask me. Snap into it! Hayfoot, strawfoot— Huh! My gosh, fellers, look who's here!"

Nuné, with the naive nonchalance of a true jungle woman, was preparing herself for a long trail. She had slipped out of her short robe, and, with a few swift folds, a roll, and a couple of knots, she transformed it into a compact little bundle with two loops, through which she deftly slid her arms. A moment more, and she stood ready, the little roll lying snugly behind her shoulders in knapsack fashion; her lithe, slender figure clad only in a tight *tanga*, or hip-girdle, with the gold cross nestling between her virginal breasts: a dryad of the jungle, limned clear and clean against the dense greenery beyond.

Head high, she gazed questioningly at the man whom she recognized as leader, awaiting his assignment to a place in line. The King of the White Ones, with only a casual glance, motioned her ahead of him and began to march. The Americans took up the step

"Boy, oh boy!" breathed Tim. "All the priests I ever knowed before now wanted me to go to heaven, but I don't care if I go to —— with this one!"

CHAPTER VI

THE STRONGHOLD

FIVE suns slid across the great green abyss and vanished behind the colossal wall of the Andes. Five nights whelmed the forest in blackness, through which moved only the savage or venomous creatures spawned to prey in gloom. While the sixth sun yet was high, a twisting line of warriors and women emerged from a shadowy defile among mountains and ended its journey.

It had been a steady march. Throughout the first day the column had met no opposition, nor any obstacles except the usual jungle traps—swamp-holes, fallen trunks, thickets of thorny palm, networks of tough woody vines, which were passed by detours or penetrated by machete-work. That night the expedition had made bivouac on the western shore of the Pastasa, killing its cooking-fires as soon as the available game had been broiled, and sleeping without lights. The next morning the Indians had produced, from the apparently empty shore-growth, a number of thin-shelled dugout canoes, in which all were ferried over the fast-flowing river. Then a detachment of paddlers had manned the canoes and vanished up-stream, while the main body resumed its progress through the bush.

"They will take the boats up to a creek, bring them inland, hide them, and then rejoin us," José explained. "I keep canoes hidden in many places for use as needed: here on the Pastasa, eastward on the Curaray, and even on that Tigre Yacu to the south, where we four once journeyed to find gold or death." He grinned reminiscently at his old-time partners. "And you may have noticed that they are made thin, so that they weigh much less than the clumsy dugouts used by most men. That makes it possible to slide them easily overland if needed—though they are more liable to crack than if they were thick. It is thus that we move fast when we will, and keep in touch with the Napo or the Amazon —where I get my guns."

"Keeping open your communications," nodded McKay. "Mighty important. But why go to the Napo?"

"Traders come up the Napo, with cartridges. I buy them."

"I see. And this little camp of yours that we're heading for—it's your main camp?"

"Yes. A poor, rough place, but one where I hope you can be comfortable."

From that time onward, they had plodded along toward the poor, rough place of which he spoke. At the next night-halt, fires were kept burning; and among the faces observed by the North Americans were those of the paddlers sent away with the canoes. When and where these men had rejoined the force they did not know. Somewhere along the way they had slipped out of the tangle and merged unnoticed with the moving chain. Observing the apparent carelessness of that night's camp—the continuance of fires and the lack of night guards—the three adventurers inevitably felt that enemies might slip up as easily as had those returning canoe men, to massacre all as they slept. But they voiced no criticism and lost no sleep. The next forenoon they revised their opinion.

As they marched onward, from a point not far ahead sounded deep, resonant notes —the signal of a heavy log drum. No such drum was carried by the men. Later, and at long intervals during the succeeding

days, the same notes were repeated, always just a little ahead. But, look as they might when they passed the places whence those sonorous notes boomed, they saw no drum, no camp, no men—nothing but the forest. Previous jungle experience told them, though, that men were there, masked by the tangle, watching the line pass while they remained invisible; men who formed vigilant outposts along the hard-beaten path now being followed by the column. It was quite evident that foes might not find it a simple matter to catch the White Ones napping.

"You've got things organized, José," Knowlton remarked, catching the Spaniard's quizzical glance after one of his vain attempts to locate the signalers. "Did you ever take any military training?"

"Ho! *Por Dios*, no! I, José Martinez, drill and walk and turn at the bidding of a brass-buttoned monkey? Not I! All that I know about organization is what common sense tells me. Yet there may be soldier sense in my blood, for I, as you know, am of the Conquistadores." He said it proudly. "Outlaw as I am, my fathers were of the conquerors who seized and held this South America. It may be that their ghosts whisper to me what to do. *Quién sabe?*"

"Faith, I believe ye," Tim seriously agreed. "It's in yer blood. Same as it's in us three fellers' blood to go hornin' into places like this here, when there's many a safer thing to do. Same as it's in Noony's blood to—uh—wal, to be different from them Jivero females, if ye git what I mean. Blood tells, as the feller says."

All four of them glanced at Nuné, swinging along with tireless pace, as much of a mystery as she had been on that first day. She still traveled in the place to which José had assigned her—a place of honor, she seemed to feel, since it was with the white men—and still preserved the silence which Piatzo or her own mood laid on her lips. Despite repeated questionings at the night halts, she had told nothing more about herself or her people. What sort of blood had she? As Tim said, it differed from that of the head-hunters who had captured her.

And now, on the sixth day, they were ending their traverse. For the past two days they had been mounting slopes, climbing higher and higher in country which became more and more broken. On this morning, the tail of the serpentine line had become its head; for José and his companions, hitherto marching in the most likely post of danger—since any attack would probably come from behind—now took the lead. Through a deep, narrow, rock-walled rift they twined along, the Americans looking aloft at times to see foreshortened figures peering down at them from the cliff edge. Then suddenly they debouched from cool shadow into blazing sun—from the clutching confinement of the jungle to a broad vista that halted the newcomers in amazement.

"This is my little camp," grinned José, waving a careless hand toward the panorama.

The little camp was perhaps two miles wide. It lay in a rugged mountain bowl, the steep green slopes of which were varied here and there by precipices of naked rock. From side to side stretched rolling hillocks, like motionless billows of an emerald sea. Near the middle rose an isolated rock island, on the top of which glimmered yellow roofs. Here and there along the verdant knolls were glimpsed other roof-peaks, and many small dents in the greenery betokened clearings. Scanning the whole expanse with a rapid survey, the strangers presently looked down at what lay below their feet. They found themselves about two hundred feet above the valley floor, to which a zigzag path dropped in swift slants from the defile through which they had entered. No house-tops showed near at hand, but before long they learned that houses were there too, concealed by the lofty trees.

"Gee cripes!" blurted Tim. "Wha'd'ye mean, little camp? This here is a young city. Mean to say this is all yourn?"

"Most certainly, friend Tim. This, and all beyond the mountains, for many a league. Yet the land beyond the mountains is nothing to me, except as it breeds men for me. This is the heart of my land, for this is where I live; and the heart of the heart is that little rock over yonder, on which I have a house. Come, let us go there and see what we may see."

Knowlton, whose blue eyes had been contemplating the scene as those of an artist would drink in a new vista, turned impulsively.

"Good work, old man!" he exclaimed. "You've created something here. There's

an atmosphere about this place—a feeling of—well, not of civilization; civilization's too cold and artificial and treacherous—but of hominess, so to speak. As if your people lived straight and pulled together and fought clean—I can't just tell you what I mean, but I'm sensitive to first impressions, and—well, this seems real!"

He stopped, flushing, as if embarrassed by his enthusiasm. José nodded, his hawk face softening.

"*Teniente*, you could not have said a thing more kind," he responded. "It is what I have striven to do—to make this real. In other places and at other times I have done things which the world calls bad. But here I found a ruin, and I have made a home."

FOR a silent moment he looked out again over his domain; a dominant fighter leaning on a gun, clad in blood-stained garments, backed by killers fresh from a death-raid; yet, for the time, only a gentle-hearted man gazing on the home he had reared for himself and his own. Then he recalled himself.

"*Caramba!* I grow sentimental! Here I stand dreaming like a love-sick boy, while the sun fries my soft brains. I need red meat in my jaws and drink in my belly. *Vamos!*"

With a truculent swagger he began swinging down the path, followed by Nuné. The Americans, resuming their way, noted with some surprize that the girl once more was clothed. While they had gazed and talked, she had made one quick survey of the settlement and then donned her simple robe. The dryad had vanished and the priestess of Piatzo reappeared.

At the base of the steep descent the path straightened out and, with slight bends, led away through the luxuriant woods. Only a few paces from the cliff-slope stood a low, broad house, with solid walls of *chonta* wood, before which lounged a small knot of soldierly savages. José, striding past, emitted a single curt grunt, to which they replied in kind, remaining unmoved. The Americans judged them to be guards, now off duty, of the natural gateway through which they had just come.

For some little distance beyond this point no house was visible; but by-paths vanishing into the greenery indicated the existence of hidden homes or other resorts. Little streams, each bridged by a few split palm-trunks lashed together, cut the path at intervals; the valley evidently was well-watered. Then, from time to time, small clearings with well-made huts were glimpsed through fringes of trees beneath which all undergrowth had been cut away. At length a broader path opened at the right, revealing a log stockade with a half-open gate. Looking backward soon after passing this, Knowlton saw that the line following him had shrunk to a half-score of riflemen. The Jivero women evidently had been herded into the corral, and the fighting men had either stopped there or scattered among the by-paths.

Finally they came out of the woodland and found themselves in a stumpy clearing, whence rose the rock which they had viewed from the entrance. For more than a hundred feet it towered above them, seemingly unscalable. Along its edge José led, and presently they were climbing among big boulders, turning at short angles. A few minutes later they were above the stones and following an ascending ledge on the face of the parent rock. And then they were at the top, passing a small garrison-hut where silent men armed with ten-foot lances squatted at ease, but wide-awake and ready. Beyond was a cluster of solid, cool-looking houses, shaded by short trees which stood sturdily in the shallow soil topping the stone.

"And so we come home," said José. "A poor, rough place, as I have said. Yet I promise that you shall find it more comfortable than some of the mosquito-cursed mud-holes in which you and I have made camps in the years gone by. First let us bathe, without fear of snake or crocodile, and then we shall eat such crude fare as we may find, and afterward look about. Come."

Up to the first and largest house he strode, the others scanning the surroundings as they walked. To the men, the most noticeable thing was that a wall of rock-blocks, waist-high, rimmed the edge of the precipice; a defense which seemed not only unnecessary but rather foolish, in view of the height of the place and the great labor involved in bringing the blocks from below. To Nuné, still wordless, the most important circumstance was that three handsome Indian women had emerged from the door and were observing her with expressions

none too friendly. Each was garbed in a short, striking frock of bark-cloth beautifully decked with feather-work; each wore a-slant in her black hair a single lustrous plume; and each resembled her companions in face and figure. Quite obviously they were sisters.

"Hullo, girls!" saluted Tim, with a wide grin. "I forgit yer names, but I recollect yer faces and I know ye're all Missus Hozy. We come back to learn yer husband some more bad tricks, if he don't know 'em all now."

The women, though unable to understand his words, smiled recognition. José chuckled. Then, in a few curt phrases, he gave them commands regarding Nuné. Without reply, they looked steadily at the new woman brought home by their hawk-faced lord; turned, with a slight beckoning motion of the head, and led the way toward one of the other houses. Nuné, cool and confident as ever, followed.

"Jealous," muttered Tim, adding, a bit anxiously: "And I seen them girls do some wicked scrappin' oncet on a time. They won't do her no harm, will they, Hozy?"

"All women are jealous," José answered, with a slight smile. "But I am master here. They will not harm her."

Straight through the house he went, and out into a *patio* where, in a square basin of stone, lay a deep, dark pool. Stone blocks beside it formed seats.

"Our bathing-place, fed by springs and made for us long before we were born," their host announced.

And, with no more ado, he peeled off his shirt. With one accord his hot, travel-stained companions stripped.

"Ooch!" gasped Tim, rising from his first plunge. "Ice-water! Colder'n —— I mean, lovely and warm, looey. What ye waitin' for? C-c-come on in, it's g-g-great!"

He clenched his jaws to still his chattering teeth.

"Oh, the bulldog on the bank
And the bullfrog in the pool,"

sang Knowlton, standing nude and laughing down at him.

"The bulldog called the bullfrog
A green old water fool!
Singing tra-la-la——"

"Hey! Let go! Ouch!"

Splash!

The bullfrog had grabbed the bulldog's ankles with two huge fists and yanked him in.

CHAPTER VII

THE OUTLAW KING

IN THE cool shadow of a spacious piazza, swept by a lusty breeze from the east, the four men lounged luxuriously in hammocks, smoking and gazing out across the valley at the farther heights.

They had dined—not crudely, as José had intimated, but on a profusion of meats and fruits served at a massive mahogany table by half-nude girls of the White Ones. They had drunk of a colorless but mellow liquor which, José said, was palm wine; and now they smoked home-made cigars rolled from tobacco grown on some plantation near by. All were freshly clothed, the spare kits of the Americans having been brought up while they ate, and Jose having donned a clean set of his *llanchama* fiber garments. And now they were wondrously comfortable and content.

McKay, lolling with long legs dangling from his hammock, flicked an ash from his cigar and spoke.

"You said you'd found a ruin here and made a home. What was the ruin?"

"The ruin of a place destroyed, Rodrigo. A place of stone, which once must have been—as Tim said some time ago—a young city; and, perhaps, not so young. Who made it—what destroyed its people—I do not know. It was made long ago, and ended long ago; so long that there is no knowledge of it among my White Ones. And, for that matter, my White Ones do not even know who they themselves are.

"*Sí*, it is so. Their only name for themselves—except 'White Ones'—is Sumataras. There is no such race as the Sumataras, so far as I have ever heard. Yet I know that the river which now is called Pastasa, and which has been so called for many years, has a more ancient name: the name of Sumatara. My people call it always Sumatara, and say it is their river, but they do not know why they call it so. They have been for centuries a lost, scattered, unknown people, and they have forgotten their own beginnings. It is a marvel that they still exist.

"My own idea—which is worth little, since there is no proof—is that they are the

last of some white race which at some time lived in the west, and which perhaps was driven eastward through the mountains and down the Pastasa; and that perhaps later on the head-hunting brutes called Jiveros broke them, or a great pestilence destroyed all but a few; and that they had to withdraw into this region to exist. It may be so, or it may not. Who can solve the mystery of this unknown land which swallows up men and races? But I know that they are far different from all other peoples in this Oriente. It is not only that they are far more fair of skin, but their eyes are set differently in their heads; their minds are different—yes, their skulls are different: more long and narrow. It is true that their ways are Indian, but in this land of the Indian there are no other ways.

"But you were asking about this place, and not about my people. It is a long tale, but I shall try to make it short. And since talking is dry work— Saquima!"

From the doorway came one of the serving-girls, bearing more of the palm wine. As she passed it about, the whites looked more critically than hitherto at her well-shaped head, straight-set eyes and trim figure. A typical girl of the White Ones, she was indeed far different from the Jivero women. Yet she also differed from Nuné, her face being broader and somewhat heavier of chin. The half-formed thought that Nuné might be a stray member of this race flickered out.

"Now," resumed José, licking his mustache, "let us begin at the beginning and tell the story as it should be told. How does a good tale start in your tongue?"

"'Once upon a time—'" quoted Knowlton.

"Ah. Good! So it shall be.

"Once upon a time, *señores*, there was a Peruvian, one José Martinez, who must flee for his life because he had killed in fight a human snake who held a position of power in the Peruvian Government. He escaped through the mountains and vanished into the jungle at the east. And there he led a life such as a villain of his class must lead, trusting no man and existing by his quickness with the knife and the bullet.

"Then, after a time, came North Americans, who not only did not seek to take the life of José but saved it for him when he was at the point of death. Yes, they did even more than this for him, though they did not know it. By their stubborn determination to succeed in what they came for, they did succeed; and so they proved to José that if a man will set his mind on doing a thing and never quit striving until that thing is done, he can accomplish what other men call impossible. And when they went away, the ambition of José, which had long been nearly dead, began to revive. Even though he was an outcast with a price on his head, he still was a man, not a brainless beast to be used for the good of other men; and he could make his future better than his past, if he was enough of a man to do it.

"More time went on, and then he heard of gold on the Tigre Yacu, where men disappeared or came back maimed and mad. He went to that river, determined to win gold or death for himself. And there, by chance, he met again his North American comrades, and on that evil river they found great wealth. Then they went away again—all but José, whose ambition now had grown all the more great. He was not satisfied to be merely a rich man. He now would be a king."

He paused, smiling out at the distance. The others hung motionless, eyes riveted on his face.

"José had met the White Ones of the Tigre Yacu," he resumed, "and had made himself one of them. *Sí*, he had joined them most thoroughly, for he had taken all nine daughters of old Chief Pachac as his wives; and when Pachac was killed in battle, José was chief of all his tribe who were left. But those few White Ones were not enough for him to rule—the Tigre Yacu country was not large enough to be his kingdom. He knew that there were other White Ones, hidden away here and there in the thick country about the Cordillera del Pastasa.

"He knew that all this wild country between the Andes, the Amazon, and the Cordillera del Putumayo was claimed by both Peru and Ecuador, but was really no man's land, since no government could conquer its savages and thus control it. So now he, who had no country and no rights and so was no man, would make all this no-man's-land his own. King No-Man, of No Man's Land! Hah!

"So José and his own little band of White Ones traveled the trails and the streams, seeking out those other scattered White Ones and talking to them of the remaking

of their nation. And, *señores*, it was no easy matter to make them see what seemed so plain. There was no organization among them; each little tribe lived where it would and moved as it pleased, and it had been thus for so many lifetimes that at first they would not think of gathering together and being ruled in a body. They said that in that way they would become mission Indians, and so become weak and easy victims for the head-hunters. In that they showed good sense: for although the priests think they are doing much good in making the Indians 'civilized' and stopping them from fighting, they really are only making them soft and fattening them for the butchers. Any man who knows this country can tell you how the mission Indians to the west and south have been butchered by the Huambizas.

"But when José made it plain that he came not to preach peace but to breed war on the Jiveros, then the other chiefs of the White Ones began to see differently. Among all the White Ones there is a blood-hate for the head-hunters, more bitter than any hate I ever have seen; it is born in them, a hundred times more fierce than the hate for a snake. And so when they found that there would be war to the death against those murderers, and that their own nation would again grow strong by coming together, then the task of José became more easy."

Again he paused. When he went on he discarded the impersonal form of narration and spoke directly of himself.

"NOW, in wandering among these people, I had always been looking for a spot which would be good for a strong settlement; but I found none which suited me. But at length I came here, to visit certain White Ones who were living over yonder, on a stream which you have not yet seen. Before I left them to visit others, I decided that this should be the spot where all should gather and make their home. As you see, it is wide, well-watered and fertile, with a natural wall all about it. There are only five passes through that wall, and all are narrow and easily guarded. And if by any chance enemies should succeed in coming through, here is this wide rock, where even a small force could hold off many times their number."

"But those mountains don't look insurmountable," interrupted McKay. "What's to hinder Jiveros from disregarding your five entrances and crawling up and over through the thick woods?"

"Several things," smiled José. "They are not so easy as they look. There are many places which can not be climbed. There are other places where wide splits in the rock bar any man from crossing. And in spots where neither of these barriers exist, there are such thick growths of thorn-trees that no bare Indian could slip through. Those thorns stand just where they are needed, and I can not believe that they grow at those spots by chance. I think they were planted there by whatever people held this place long ago. They had a neat settlement here, those first ones. I wish I could know who they were.

"In this valley, for as long as the White Ones can remember, have grown many kinds of fruits and other foods—growing wild, without care except the little attention given to some of them by the women; all planted, without doubt, by those forgotten ones. On this rock, where now we rest, they had large houses of stone; and down below, in many places, were other such houses. That, I think, was their great mistake, for when I came here not one stone house remained—there was nothing but heaps of rocks, and those below here still are nothing else, for we have not moved any except those found up here. Some terrible earthquake must have smashed them all at once. Perhaps that was the end of all the people here. A sudden *temblor* in the night, when all slept, and——"

He motioned as if crushing an insect.

"So I have not repeated that mistake. All our houses are broad and low and made of wood; the walls are of *chonta*, which will stop even a bullet, and yet are not so heavy as to crush us if they fall in. The stones which once were houses up here now rest yonder at the edge, where we placed them as a wall when we cleared this spot. It was as easy to pile them as to throw them over, and at some time they might be useful to drop on the head of visitors. My men who guard the tops of the passes all are well supplied with stones also, as a discouragement to strangers from the west."

"Oof! And we passed right under some o' them head-crackers when we come in," recalled Tim.

"Just so. But the signals sent ahead

told that all was well. I have a telegraph system too, you see."

"How do you work it? I heard it, but I couldn't see it," said Knowlton.

"It is the *tunday*—the log drum which the Jiveros themselves use. I will show it to you presently, for I have one here. This is the—ah——"

"Central station. Headquarters," supplied McKay.

"Exactly. We have our own code, so that no sneaking Jiveros could understand it. But now let me speak of more important matters of organization, so that you may see how I progress.

"As you know, I had much gold when you left me. I now know where there is even more, for my people have told me of certain places along this cordillera where one has only to dig it out. But I have not yet touched it, and perhaps I never shall. It is useful to me only to arm my men. Oh yes, I could buy many other things through the traders who supply my arms, but it has become my habit to make the jungle give me what I need, and to do without the things of 'civilization'—bah! an empty name, that 'civilization,' which loads a man with useless burdens. Guns and ammunition and machetes, however, I must have. So, as I have told you, I obtain them from traders on the Amazon or the Napo, sending out certain men of mine to meet them and bring back the goods. No trader is allowed to come here, or even to know where this place is.

"So I keep my men well-armed; and I have trained them all in the handling of a carbine, though not all of them carry guns when on a march. Every man of mine is a warrior, and can use rifle, machete, arrow, or spear with ease. Every boy is learning the use of weapons. In a few more years the White Ones will be a fast-growing nation to be feared by better men than the Jiveros. And——"

"Wait a minute," McKay broke in again. "You said 'fast growing.' How so?"

"Hah! How do you suppose a nation grows?" laughed the Spaniard. "By being born. Is it not so? *Bien.* I have seen to it that more children shall be born to the White Ones than before."

"Oh. Jivero mothers?"

"*Sangre de Cristo!* No! Those black-toothed animals become the mothers of my future warriors? They are slaves! Slaves who do the work for the women of the White Ones, and so give the mothers more time to care for themselves and their children. Slaves they are, and slaves they stay.

"See. We must have slaves. My men are warriors and hunters, and they do only the work such men should do. Their women are mothers to as many children as they can bear. So the Jivero women are the workers on the plantations. And, having no mates, they will have no more children. That is one more way by which we shall overcome the Jivero nation.

"We kill the Jivero men; we take away the Jivero women and children—giving the women an easier life than they had before, and preventing their bringing more head-hunters into the world. And the Jiveros themselves are helping us by killing one another in their head-hunts; for they are split into tribes such as the Huambizas, the Aguarunas, the Antipas, who war on one another. With the White Ones helping them to grow weaker, while the White Ones themselves grow more powerful—what is the end?"

"The end's the finish o' the Jiveros," chortled Tim. "Boy, ye've got a whale of an ambition, I'll tell the world! But say, all this is goin' to take a long time. S'posin' somethin' happens to ye, or s'posin' ye git old before the finish comes—then who's King Nobody the Second? Have ye got a prince trainin' for the job?"

"Most certainly," grinned the Spaniard. "I now have twelve princes and eight princesses, and there will soon be more."

"Wha-a-at! Twelve and eight—twenty kids in three years?"

"Just so. When I command my people to increase I must set a good example, is it not true? I had hoped to have nine sons each year, but not even a king can regulate such matters. But if I live fifteen years longer——"

"If ye do, ye'll have to make yer Injuns move outside. Ye'll need this whole place for yer own family. Say, when I git back home I'm goin' to ship ye down a statue to stick up on this here rock—a fierce-lookin' guy, with words under it sayin': 'Hozy Marteeny, Father of His Country. Final Score, Boys— blank: Girls—blank.' Then yer oldest boy can fill in the figgers when yer game's called. I bet it'll be a world's record!

"But say, now, on the level, don't this

king business o' yourn make ye feel sort o' tied down? I can see ye take it pretty serious, and it seems like an awful lot o' responsibility. Me, I'd git sick of it after a while and want to be foot-loose, with nothin' on me mind but me hat."

The Spaniard's mirthful face suddenly clouded. For a moment he did not answer. Then he abruptly arose and began pacing up and down.

"Friend Tim, you have touched me on a sore spot," he grudgingly admitted. "It is just as you say. I grow sick of it at times. I become as restless as a *tigre*. While the fit lasts I want to turn my back on all this and be once more a lone rover—to drift without a care, meeting things as they come. That is why I go often with my men on raids, when I should remain here. They could work as well under their own commanders. But I must travel the trails, fight my enemies with my own hands, or I find life flat—yes, unbearable! For only a little time after such a journey, I am content. Then I must move again. Why, in the name of the ——, must a man be so restless?

"And that is not all. *Señores*, I am ashamed to confess this thing, and yet it is true. More and more strongly my own blood calls to me—the blood of Spanish people in the west, beyond the great mountains. They have cast me out. They have hounded me, sought my blood. Many a time I have cursed them. Yet—I ache for the friends I once had; for the *fiestas*, the cathedral bells, the voices and the laughter of my own people. I am a white man. I am not an Indian. Yet among Indians I must live, and in the jungle I must die!

"King?" He laughed harshly. "*Sí*, I am a king! I have made myself a king, and built for myself a prison!"

Savagely he paced the earth floor, his face hard-drawn. Nobody spoke. The three stared at their cigar-stubs, avoiding one another's eyes. The abrupt revelation of an unsuspected heart-hunger in this indomitable adventurer stirred them to pity which they could not voice.

With all his pride in his achievements, this King of No Man's Land was but one of that pathetic lost legion whose members are found in all the wild corners of the earth—the "Men Who Can Never Come Back."

TO BE CONTINUED

THE KING OF NO MAN'S LAND

A Four-Part Story
Part II

by Arthur O. Friel

Author of "Thicker Than Water," "The Thirty Gang," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

BACK to back, three white men — McKay, Knowlton, and Ryan—fought doggedly against foes half seen. They had poor targets—a glimmer of steel; an arrow streaking from a clump of broad-leaved plantain; a dodging movement among a tangle of lianas.

It was an uneven fight and, when fierce yells announced the arrival of another party of savages, it seemed that the white men were doomed. And then the firing in the jungle diminished. From near at hand came sudden splashes, earthy thumps, grunts and snarls of grappling antagonists.

Running feet padded and the jungle erupted a figure as grisly as a buccaneer of the Spanish Main. Indians, all armed with spear and rifle, smeared with the blood of foemen, hard-jawed and slit-eyed, followed close behind him.

"It is José Martinez!" cried Knowlton.

"It is true," yelled José, his teeth flashing. "Welcome back my companions of days gone by. What a killing you have made here!"

"Yeah! And now ye come hornin' in and busting up the game!" snorted Tim.

"Then you shall join mine," retorted José. "But come, I must move."

A little later, after much bloody fighting, the four white men sat in the big hut of the conquered Jivero community, scowling at the roof-pole from which hung a score of human heads.

"We're looking for Rand," McKay said presently.

"Rand!" exclaimed José. "Your friend and mine. I have not forgotten. It was he who first brought you three into this part of the world. He disappeared while traveling in Brazil and you found him alive, but crazed by a bullet, among the cannibals of the Rio Javary, in Brazil. And you cured his craziness by hiting him over the head with a gun."

Knowlton nodded.

"He's disappeared again—we're afraid he's gone back to the jungle."

One of José's men brought in one of the women captives. She was not a Jivero woman but a prisoner brought from the country of the Huambizas away to the southeast. She spoke Spanish perfectly and—was very beautiful. Around her neck a gold cross was suspended. Her name, she said, was Nuné.

She refused to answer José's searching questions but the next morning, proving that she was not ill-disposed toward them, Nuné saved their lives by warning them not to eat the food prepared by the captured Jivero women—it had been poisoned.

By noon the party started back for José's stronghold. Five suns slid across the great green abyss and vanished behind the colossal wall of the Andes. Five nights whelmed the forest in blackness through which moved only the creatures spawned to prey in gloom.

On the sixth day they came to the wonderful domain José had made his own. A stronghold which was practically impregnable; a fertile, sun-lit plateau peopled by healthy, intelligent people who called José "king."

"On the level now," said Tim Ryan after José had explained his system of government and his ambition to make his White Ones so powerful that they could exterminate the murderous head-hunters of the jungle; "On the level now: Don't this king business make ye feel sort of tied down?"

"I ache for the voices and laughter of my own people," José said sorrowfully. "I am a white man. I am not an Indian. Yet among the Indians I must live; in the jungles I must die." He laughed harshly. "King? *Sí*, I have made myself a king and built for myself a prison."

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CHAPTER VIII

THE INQUISITION

OUT of the northwest, deep and slow, sounded the boom of a drum. José halted. His visitors sat up, watching him and listening. The sound ceased. Then, somewhere close at hand, thundered a single drum-stroke in reply.

With a motion to the others, José strode off the piazza and toward the rear. They arose and followed. While they walked, the distant drum began thumping again; and now it spoke in irregular beats, with pauses. It still was sending its message when the white men reached the home station of the jungle telegraph.

A small open-sided hut formed the station. Within it, waist-high, hung the *tunday*—a section of hollow log with several notches, suspended by fiber cord and held firm by another cord anchored in the ground. Beside the drum stood a symmetrical young Indian holding a mallet encased in tapir-hide and listening intently to the incoming report.

As the northern drum became silent, he looked steadily at José. The latter spoke briefly. Still wordless, the operator swung his mallet in an unhurried succession of blows, striking with no apparent effort, but evoking thunderous tones. The last half-dozen notes were beaten in a rapid tattoo, which, the North Americans surmised, denoted a query.

Back came an answer. José frowned. For a minute he considered. Then he gave curt directions, heard them sent, and listened while one note thumped back in response. The operator laid his mallet on the drum, and his master turned away.

"This is strange," he pondered. "An Indian from the northwest has been stopped while trying to reach me. He carried a written message for me. He is being held at the place where he was caught, while one of my men runs here with the paper.

"That Indian must have been sent by the *padres* at Canelos. Nobody but the priests could make him come into this country. But those priests have no love for me, and I cannot understand why they should send me any word."

The others exchanged glances.

"Maybe it's for us," Knowlton suggested. "They knew we were looking for you when we were there, and maybe they've changed their opinion of us and—Say! Here's another possibility—maybe Dave has turned up!"

McKay's face, and Tim's too, brightened. The Spaniard looked skeptical.

"Might be," McKay said. "The Canelos outfit doesn't know we're looking for him, but the people up in the mountains do. They might have gotten track of him and sent a message. The priests would relay it, perhaps."

"Perhaps," conceded José; but his tone indicated disbelief.

"What's the trouble between you and the clergy, José?" asked Knowlton.

"There is no trouble, except that we do not agree. I have no enmity for them. But they do not understand my ideas. They believe in making a land peaceful through the cross, and in spite of all their failures they still cannot see that this region is too savage to be conquered in that way. So, because I build my nation by war—and because I allow no priest to come into my land and soften my men—they regard me as a man of blood, a son of the devil, and an enemy of the church. The first two of those things I may be, but not the third. Perhaps the time will come when they will realize that I was wiser than they, and that the heathen Martinez, slayer of head-hunters, was a power for good. But I care nothing for what they may say. The only priest whose talk I wish to hear is the one we brought with us."

They were walking again toward the royal house, passing others on the way. At one of these, a number of warriors seemed to be engaged in cleaning guns or leisurely making arrows. At another, women drowsed in hammocks or passed in and out. Apparently no Jivero women were permitted to ascend this rock.

"Ye mean Noony," nodded Tim, looking at the women. "What ye done with the li'l rascal? And what ye goin' to do with her later on?"

"She is resting in that house of the women. That is the house of my wives and children, and she is the first stranger who has ever been allowed to enter it. I intend soon to question her again."

He paused, glanced at the sun, and considered.

"But no. I think that first I shall take her for a walk—and you also, if you will come."

"Sure. Anything you say," yawned Knowlton.

"*Bueno.* Huarma!"

At his call, a tall young woman arose from a hammock on the shady porch of the women's house and stood looking inquiringly at him. In monotone, he spoke half a dozen Indian words. She turned and walked within. José resumed his way.

"Nuné will come to us presently," he said. "By the time the sun sets I think she will be in the mood to talk. We shall see."

As they passed onward, Tim stared back at the house.

"Twenty kids in there, and never a bawl!" he marveled. "How d'ye keep 'em quiet, Hozy?"

"I do not," chuckled the father. "But their mothers do. They have the Indian gift of training children to silence—indeed, the child of the jungle seems born to silence. Yet they are not so dumb in the morning. Now they take their afternoon sleep."

Without pausing at the house, he passed on to the guard-hut at the top of the cliff path. There the four waited, the Americans quickly surveying the interior and then turning their attention to the surroundings.

They noticed that the two sentries now on duty were not the same men who had watched them arrive, and now they recalled seeing the other pair resting at the house of the warriors behind them. They observed that a couple of carbines stood at the door for use if the long spears should prove insufficient, and that a small *tunday* and mallet hung ready to summon reserves. Then, looking below, they saw that not only the upper section of the ledge but much of the clearing was visible from this point.

"I am a most careful ruler, yes?" grinned José. "Not even a mosquito is allowed to pass and bite the sacred hide of the king."

"Yeah," assented Tim. "Too bad ye're so scairt o' gittin' hurt, ye poor fish. But we know how it is. Ye've got the women and kids to look out for."

"That is it," nodded the king. "I am not here at all times, and they must be protected. These guards never leave this rock. Ah, here is Nuné."

The others glanced around and forgot to turn back. McKay, eyes twinkling, advised:

"Steady, Tim! Take a grip on your heart."

"Hm! Our lady has changed again," commented Knowlton. "First a priestess, then a nymph, and now——"

"Oh, boy! Ain't she the baby vamp, though!"

Nuné had indeed changed. The alterations were simple, yet striking. Her plain, travel-stained robe had given way to one of the brilliantly feathered gowns of the wives of José. Her hair, which had been caught up in rough-and-ready fashion during the march, now formed an ebony frame for her ivory face. Both gown and hair accentuated the fairness of her skin; and her poise, the tilt of her head, the light in her brown eyes, held a challenge—born not of defiance or coquetry, but of the knowledge that she was very good to look upon.

"Ah! It works," muttered José.

"What works?" puzzled Knowlton.

"An idea I had. You shall see. Come."

DOWN the cliff-path he went, and out along the way by which they had come in. Presently they reached the stockade, where the gate now was shut. A couple of spearmen, at his approach, drew a bar and swung the barrier open. The five passed inside and looked about.

Within were a number of huts, most of which now were empty. In those nearest the gate were gathered the recently arrived Jivero women and children, resting after their march. They looked silently at the visitors, their faces expressionless until their eyes rested on Nuné. Then those eyes narrowed, and into them crept a snaky glint.

Nuné returned their unpleasant gaze with a steady, impersonal regard; but it was obvious that she recognized the menace under those lowering lids. José chuckled softly.

"The mind of a woman is queer, yes?" he said. "Behold these, unmoved by whatever fate I—a man—may give them, but stung by the sight of their Huambiza prisoner dressed like a queen."

Then, in Spanish—

"Nuné, would you like to live here?"

Her quick backward step answered more eloquently than words.

"No?" he teased. "It is a very comfortable place. But let us now look farther."

As he walked out he chuckled again. The gate swung shut behind them with a sullen bump, the bar slid creaking into its post-hole, and the spearmen resumed their

vigil. The five returned to the main path, and soon turned down a byway.

A short distance in, they came to a space cleared of undergrowth but shadowed by the widespread crests of lofty trees. There stood a cool house, log-walled and palm-thatched, where a young woman held a baby while she watched two small boys shoot little arrows at a tree. On the approach of the party, the boys whirled and leveled their miniature weapons at the invaders; then lowered them and stood half-smiling, half-serious, as their king passed on.

"My little fighting men," jested José. "As quick as cats. And already they hit what they shoot at. They will make hard warriors."

A little farther on, they came into a small but fertile plantation. There toiled several Jivero women, watched by a Jivero boy holding a club. The boy was hardly ten years old, but his face was grim as that of a grown man.

"See," said José, speaking in Spanish for the benefit of Nuné. "Thus we use the Jiveros and grow our food. These women are allotted to this house behind us. The boy is overseer. One of those women is his mother, another his sister, but they gain no favors because of that. He is a Jivero man-child, and he rules them by Jivero law. He will never become a shrinker of heads—we White Ones see to that—but he and others like him are good slave-masters. If the women disobey, he must punish, or he will be put to work with them. He knows how to punish."

Covertly he watched Nuné while he talked. On her face he spied repulsion, and over his bearded lips flickered a grin.

"Now let us go," he went on. "This, my friends, is one of many such places, in this valley. They all are much alike, and, having seen one, you have seen all. Now we shall return to our rock and speak of another matter."

As they retraced their steps, the Americans glanced curiously at their quondam partner, endeavoring to fathom his purpose in leading the girl on this tour of inspection; for it was quite obvious to them, if not to her, that the exhibition of the servitude of the Jiveros was no mere whim. The donation of her new dress, too, had undoubtedly been made as the result of his commands, since his women would be quite unlikely to volunteer such adornment to one whom they could not fail to regard as a possible rival. These moves were deliberate preliminaries to something. But to what?

The ruler of the White Ones vouchsafed no information, and they asked no questions, waiting for the little drama to play itself. Up to the top they returned, and into the king's house they walked. There José seated himself at his big mahogany table, signing to the others to take places along the board. His own chair was as massive as the table, tall-backed, with a great jaguar-hide thrown carelessly across its top—a fitting seat for jungle royalty. The table now was blank and bare; the shadowy, silent room solemn as a court.

For several minutes the Spaniard sat motionless, his eyes dwelling on Nuné, his expression austere as that of a judge about to pronounce sentence. When he spoke, his voice was stern.

"Nuné, it now is time to speak whatever you know of the land of the Huambizas."

The girl steadily met his gaze. After a moment she answered—

"Nuné does not yet hear the command of Piatzo to speak."

"*Bien.* Then Nuné must remain here until she hears the command."

"You have promised," she said, "that Nuné could return to her people."

"True. But who are your people? The Huambizas?"

"The Huambizas."

"And you are a servant of Piatzo?"

"It is so."

"Bah!" He struck the table with a hand. "Both of those things cannot be true. The Huambizas are Jiveros. They are the most cruel and fierce of all the Jiveros. They do not obey Piatzo. When the men of the Huambizas do not serve Piatzo, no woman of theirs can serve him. If you are a Huambiza, you cannot serve Piatzo. If you are a servant of Piatzo you are not a Huambiza. So you do not speak truth. To one who does not speak truth I do not keep a promise unless I choose."

She sat dumb.

"You are very fair of skin," he went on, "and I know that some of the Huambizas are much more light than any other Jiveros. They have in them the blood of Spanish women captured three hundred years ago at the destruction of Sevilla de Oro, and of Spanish children who were caught in other raids since then at Barranca and Borja and who grew up as men and women of the

Huambizas. I know too, that you were brought as a prisoner to the place where I found you, and that you came from the Huambiza country, because I saw at that place the freshly-cured heads of three Huambiza men killed when you were caught. So I believe you to be Huambiza. But your cross and your talk of Piatzo—they mean nothing unless proved. Your story may be only a clever lie to gain the protection of the cross, and your cross may be the plunder from the body of some real priest beheaded by your Huambiza mate!"

At that she started up, horror on her face.

"No!" she denied. "It is——"

Then she stopped short.

"It is—what? You go no further. *Bien.* I understand. You refuse to talk, not because Piatzo tells you to be silent, but because you would protect the Huambizas from me. Piatzo does not bid any one to protect murderers from vengeance! You are Huambiza—Jivero—and in my kingdom there is but one place for women of the Jiveros. You have just seen that place. A real servant of Piatzo might remain on this rock, with all honor, or go freely away. But I allow no Jivero to stay here. A Jivero must work, down below, among other Jiveros."

He stopped and shot a warning glance at Tim, whose florid face was turning redder and whose blue eyes were beginning to glitter at this merciless denunciation and threat. The impressionable Irishman was taking this "third degree" as seriously as was Nuné, and now he was rapidly warming into a fighting wrath. McKay and Knowlton, following the look, gripped his shoulders and scowled at him. Tim, after a glare at both, swallowed something and remained silent.

Nuné stood as if petrified, conflicting emotions succeeding one another on her dazed face. José, watching her, spoke as harshly as before, giving her no hint of hope. But his words were directed to the Americans in their own tongue:

"Tim, learn something about handling women from a man who rules nine. There are times when you must 'treat 'em rough,' as you would say. This girl's weak spot is her pride—a true Spanish pride—and I am treating it roughly. First I pricked it by letting her find herself inferior in appearance to my wives. Then I flattered it by putting new clothing in her way, and the woman triumphed over the priestess, as you saw. And now, when her pride is most keen, I strike it brutally with a threat to degrade her into a fellow-slave with those snake-women whom she hates as they hate her. Behold now the result."

Even as he talked, the girl's head drooped. Then she regained her calmness and looked at her judge as steadily as before; but when she spoke, it was with a touch of humility never hitherto shown:

"It is true that Piatzo does not protect those who kill. It is true that my people do not serve him. It may be that Nuné has been sent to you by the Good Father, but she was blind to his will. Nuné will speak what she knows."

"It is well," José responded grimly. "Speak all the truth, and all that you can remember from the earliest time. Then shall I judge."

CHAPTER IX

A GIRL OF THE HEAD-HUNTERS

"NUNÉ is a girl of the Rio Upano," began the girl, speaking in her usual quiet tone. "The Upano comes from the great mountains, and on it is the city of Macas. A long way below Macas the rough water ends, and the river then is called Morona. It is a river of the Huambizas. In all its length there is no town of white men except Macas.

"Nuné was a little girl of the Huambizas who lived on a small stream called Kwana. The Huambizas of the Kwana had their house at a place two days west from the Upano. There Nuné lived and grew. She saw the men go away and come back with new heads and new women and children. Sometimes the new ones were very dark and came from a long distance away. Sometimes they were almost as light as Nuné. Nuné was more white than any of the other girls or boys.

"There was a wizard on the Kwana. Nuné was afraid of him, and so was every one else. He had a great snake that told him many things. It was a hungry snake. Sometimes a baby vanished. The wizard always said a demon had snatched the baby because its mother had thought bad luck upon the tribe. So the mother would be punished. A spear would be stuck through her stomach and she would die in great pain.

But Nuné noticed that when a baby was gone the snake always slept a long time.

"Nuné spoke about this. She said the babies had gone into the belly of the snake. The wizard was very angry. He said she must be killed for speaking so. He said she

was no Huambiza, but a white cat brought home from a raid, and no good ever came from sparing such an evil creature. Now she must be killed, or the demon in her would cause all the tribe to be caught by their enemies. The *curaca** did not like this, because Nuné now would soon be a woman, and a son of the *curaca* wanted her. But he was afraid of the wizard, too. They talked and fought with words. The wizard made the *curaca* believe Nuné must die. She must be tied to a post, and the snake would come there and crush her.

"So Nuné was tied to the post. First there was much beating of the drums, and the men took the heads of their enemies from the house and marched around her swinging the heads by the hair. This went on all day, and at night little fires were built all around Nuné and her post to keep her demon from escaping. The fires were not near enough to burn her, but they gave light, and men watched. All the next day there was drumming and marching. All this time Nuné stood at the post, with no food.

"That night the wizard watched alone. When all slept he told Nuné he would take her to a secret place where none would find her. There she would live and there he would come to her at times, and she would be his woman. The people would think a demon had eaten her in the night. But Nuné would rather be killed than be the woman of the wizard. Even the snake was not as bad as he. She told him so. Then he was more angry than before.

"In the morning the wizard brought the snake. He blew on a pipe of cane with holes, and the snake followed him. He walked around and around the post, and the snake slid around and around after. Every one was there to see Nuné die.

"Then a great terrible voice spoke. From the forest came a tall thin man with awful eyes shining like the eyes of a tiger. He wore a long black robe and carried a gold cross. He came through the crowd and stood beside Nuné. He roared in a strange tongue and shook his cross at the snake and the wizard. The wizard stood still and the snake stopped. Then the wizard howled that this was a devil priest of the white men and the warriors must kill him. But the men did not move. They were afraid of the awful eyes and the thunder voice of the man in black.

"Then the wizard made strange noises to the snake. The snake came to kill Nuné and the man of the cross. The man reached under his robe and drew a machete. The machete flashed and the snake had no head.

"The snake rolled and twisted. It struck the wizard and threw him down. It caught him around the neck. His tongue ran out and his face turned black. When the snake was still the wizard was still. He was killed by his dead snake.

"The people were much afraid. They made this white man their new wizard. But he had no magic. He would not make the rain come as a good sign for the hunting of heads. When he had learned the tongue of the Huambizas he told them they must stop killing. They must worship Piatzo. If they did not they would all be burned forever. But the Huambizas did not believe this. They killed more men and they did not worship Piatzo, and they were not burned. So they said this man was no wizard, but a man with a demon. But they were afraid to kill him. His eyes were so terrible that no man dared to strike at him. And he said that if they should kill him Piatzo would kill them. They were not much afraid of Piatzo, but for a long time they did not harm this man.

"Because he had taken Nuné from the wizard and the snake, Nuné now was his woman by Huambiza law. He did not want a woman. But Nuné was not quite a woman yet, and he let her be his servant

*Chief.

and live with him in the house of the dead wizard. He was kind. He taught Nuné his language, which she learned very fast. He told her to call him *Padre*, and said he had come to her because he heard the drums calling him.

"He asked if Nuné remembered living anywhere else. Nuné said no. But she remembered what the wizard said, that she was not a Huambiza but a white cat brought there from some other place. She told this to *Padre*. He said she must be a Spanish child, stolen perhaps from Macas. He was of Macas, and knew of several babies who had been lost from there with their mothers. But Nuné could not remember anything before being on the stream Kwana.

"So Nuné became a woman in the house of *Padre*. He was a good man and taught her much. He was kind to all the people, except when he was angered and shouted of the wrath of Piatzo. He could cast out demons with his cross and his staring eyes. He made men well who were sick. But he could not drive out his own demon or make his own mind well. Often in the night he would cry out that his brothers called him mad, and ask the Great Father why he must suffer so. And he would cry:

" 'Mad, you fools? It is you who are mad, who stay comfortably in Macas while the heathen await the Word. They will not come to you. The Word must go to them!'

"And then he would groan—

" 'O *Dios*, how long?'

"Then he became sick. As he lay sick he taught Nuné how to drive out demons, and how to put water on babies to save them from burning forever, and other things. When he grew more strong he made men bring him a little gold, and with the gold he made a cross. He gave that cross to Nuné, and told her that by it she could carry on the work of Piatzo when he was gone. He felt that he soon would be there no more. That is how Nuné got the cross which she now has.

"Now the son of the *curaca* wanted Nuné as before. But Nuné would not have him. He had done nothing to save her from the wizard and the snake. And *Padre* told him in his thunder voice to leave Nuné in peace. But one day Nuné heard a great cry, and *Padre* was dead. The son of the *curaca* had shot an arrow into his back. Then he came leaping and cut off the head of *Padre*. And he took Nuné by the hair, shouting that she now was his woman.

"Before he could drag Nuné to his house there was a terrible yelling and men sprang from the forest all about. Arrows and spears flew and there was banging of guns. In a little time all the Huambiza men were dead and their heads cut off. Nuné and the other women and children were driven toward the river Upano. Some women who rebelled were killed and their heads taken. The head of *Padre* too was carried away. The men were Jiveros from beyond the Upano, to the south. They now had won many Huambiza heads and were proud and glad.

"They soon stopped because night came. In the night Nuné crept to the stick where the heads were, and took away the head of *Padre*. She carried it back to her sleeping-place. She dug a hole with her fingers and buried the head, so that the Jiveros could not make it small with the others. She had to move as quietly as a snake, because all about were fires and men awake. But in the morning the head of *Padre* was safe. The men were very angry, but they could not find the head. Nuné had covered the place so carefully that no sign was left.

"Then they went on. At the Upano they stayed long enough to make the heads small. For two days and two nights they worked, with much dancing and shouting. While they did this Nuné talked to other women who could swim. She said they might escape if they would try hard. They were afraid. They said they would be killed. But Nuné gave them faith. While it was very dark they made a run for the water. They jumped in, and the swift water carried them away. They swam far in the night. When day came they went up a stream at the right. They saw no more of the Jiveros.

"Before long they found another Huambiza house. The other women took new men and lived there. But Nuné wanted no man. She would go with the cross and the word of Piatzo, as *Padre* had told her to do. When the men said she must stay and become a mother, she told them she would put on them the curse of Piatzo and they would be killed by their enemies.

"The other women who had been with her warned the men to take care. They said Nuné was not like other women but was under the protection of Piatzo, and Piatzo

would kill any one who hurt her. They told how Piatzo sent *Padre* to save Nuné and how the wizard was then killed by his own snake. They told how Piatzo threw the Jiveros on the Huambizas as soon as the son of the *curaca* struck *Padre*. They said even the head of *Padre* had been snatched by Piatzo in darkness from the head-sticks. The men thought about this and grew afraid. Their *curaca* and their wizard talked. They agreed that Nuné must not be harmed.

"This word went about among other Huambizas. When Nuné went to new Huambiza houses no man laid hand on her. She cast out devils and made men well and saved babies from fire as *Padre* had said. She did not try to make the men stop taking heads, because she knew they would not stop. Yet Piatzo gave his protection to any Huambiza house where Nuné stayed. No enemy struck at such a house when she was in it.

"So Nuné went up and down the Huambiza land. But she tired of seeing the little heads and thought of Macas, where she might have been born. So she went to Macas. There she found other men like *Padre*. They too were called *Padre* and wore black robes. She told them about the *Padre* she knew, and they asked many questions. They remembered him, and once one of them tapped his head, looking queerly at the others, and the others nodded. But they said he had died for the glory of *Dios* and would have great reward. And they said Nuné was truly a servant of Piatzo, and that through her the *infieles* might at last come to respect the cross. They thought she should go back and carry on her work.

"But Nuné liked Macas and would stay there. But she could find no one who knew her. And men laughed and called her Huambiza and white Indian and other things, and only the *Padres* saved her from being a slave. So Nuné did not like Macas longer. She went back to her own land."

FOR the first time the girl hesitated, as if debating what to say next. Her eyes strayed to the intent trio of North Americans, seeming to study their faces anew. The Spaniard's lids narrowed shrewdly. The room was silent until she resumed her narrative, bringing it to a rapid conclusion:

"One day Nuné went from a Huambiza house into the forest to find an herb. While she was there, a great noise came from the place she had left. It was a fight. Soon came some Jiveros hurrying away with three Huambiza heads. They had struck at the place but failed to capture it. Many of them were hurt. They caught Nuné and took her away. Nuné had to go. She could not escape. They were very ugly and watched her closely.

"They traveled fast until they reached a great house near the Pastasa. Then they quarreled about Nuné. Each wanted her. The *curaca* said he would decide the matter. While they talked, another fight began in the forest. Men rushed out. The fight became very bad. Then it was over. Piatzo had sent new men to save Nuné. You are those men."

Thus simply she closed her recital. The men stirred, glancing at one another and then looking again at her with frank admiration. José spoke first, still holding her with his piercing gaze.

"You have spoken well. I see now that you are truly a priestess of Piatzo. Yet you have not told all."

Again that momentary hesitation was noticeable. Then, defensively, she countered—

"What more is there to tell?"

"Perhaps little. Perhaps much. In the years since Nuné became a woman she has been the woman of no man?"

"It is so." Her head lifted a trifle.

"Has Nuné never met the man she desired?"

"That is a matter which must remain in the heart of Nuné!" she retorted, with a flash of spirit.

"Ah. Perhaps you are right. Let us put it in another way. Has Nuné desired any man of the Huambizas or of the Jiveros?"

"No."

"Has Nuné found in the land of the Huambizas or of the Jiveros any man who is not one of them? A white man, perhaps?"

This time the hesitation was even more pronounced. Her eyes darted to black-bearded, gray-eyed McKay.

"Answer!" snapped José.

"It is so," she admitted.

"Ah! *Sí!* Now tell us of him."

Mutiny smoldered in the gaze she gave him.

"You would find an enemy?" she demanded.

"No. I would learn of a friend."

Another pause, while eye probed eye. Then her face cleared.

"In a great house of the Huambizas between the river Morona and the river Paute," she slowly said, "Nuné knows a man who is a white Indian like herself. But he is not a Huambiza. He speaks the tongue of the white man and wears a black beard—like that of this man."

She motioned toward McKay.

"Yet he speaks also Indian tongues. He talks the language of the Quichua Indians of the north, and of some nation to the south, and now he has learned the words of my own people. He says he is an Indian from far down the Marañon, which there is called Amazon, and that he traveled many days to become one of the Huambizas. He has not been many moons in this country, but he now fights among the leaders on the raids. He owns a gun and is a strong fighter. But he kills only men, and will not shrink a head or carry away a woman. It is not the custom of his nation to do this."

José, who at first had leaned forward expectantly, now sat back and frowned as if perplexed.

"Is he a white man or an Indian?"

"He is a white man and an Indian, as Nuné is a white woman and an Indian."

"*Caramba!* I do not understand this. He comes from the Amazon? Hm! Does he wear white-man clothing?"

"No. He wears only the crotch-cloth, like all Huambizas. He can make and shoot the bow and arrow, and call the monkeys, and do many other things no white man does. Yet he can do many white-man things also. And his gun is one that speaks fast, with yellow bullets."

José scowled all the more. Sudden light flashed into his face.

"That is it!" he breathed. "Quick, girl! Of what nation on the Amazon is this man? What is the color of his eyes? How is he called?"

"He is of a nation called Mayoruna, on a river named Yavarí. He has——"

"Mayoruna!" ejaculated McKay. "Yavarí! Those are the Mayoruna cannibals, and the Rio Javary, where we first found Dave!"

"*Sí!* But be quiet a moment longer, friend! Nuné, go on! His eyes?"

"His eyes are green. In his hair is a white mark over the left ear. He is called Rana."

José nodded, his mouth hardening. The Americans sat dazed. Slowly they turned and looked at one another, and back at José, and then blankly at nothing.

"Cripes!" muttered Tim. "It's him! Rana is Dave Rand! And he's gone clean to the bad! Him, with all his brains and money, turned into a roarin' head-huntin' Injun! My ——!"

CHAPTER X

A VOICE FROM THE WEST

"I HAVE feared something of this sort," said the King of the White Ones.

"Do you mean to say you've suspected this right along?" demanded Knowlton. "And kept your mouth shut about it to us? Do you call that square?"

"It is more square than to insinuate such a thing about Señor Dave when I did not know it to be true," was the rather cool reply. "And I can not say that I suspected it. Rather, I felt it—as a man vaguely feels that some evil thing is near him when he can neither see nor hear it. I did not wish to suspect it—I put the thought from me and told myself it could not be so."

He stared in a troubled way through the open doorway, beyond which the long shadows of approaching sunset stretched across the little acropolis.

"This thing is more serious to me than to you," he went on. "And this is the way of it:

"A little time ago the word came to me that among the Huambizas was a man who was increasing their power and making them more fierce in their raiding. I could learn very little about this man, for the talk was vague and came from some newly captured Jivero women, who knew only the rumor which had drifted into the Jivero region. But the report was that this man was a very light Huambiza with a black beard—the lighter Huambizas often have such beards—who fought with a gun and was very deadly. It was said also that the Huambizas now were raiding in larger parties and going farther, and this was said to be because of this man's planning. That was all I could learn.

"Now the great secret of my strength in this land is the fact that my White Ones are organized and that the shrinkers of heads are not. As I have said, the Jivero nation is made up of four great tribes—the

Jiveros themselves, the Huambizas, the Antipas and the Aguarunas—who have the same language and customs; but instead of standing together they kill one another. Inside the tribes there is much the same lack of unity, although there is not so much killing.

"Each settlement is generally alone and a long way from the next, and its *curaca* has no power over the next place, and sometimes very little control of his own men. There are times when a great number of men will come together for a certain raid, but that is not often; and as soon as it is over they scatter to their own places. All this is much in my favor. I can strike a certain place, destroy it, move on, and destroy others in turn. So I can make every blow deadly and lose few of my own men. I can not afford to lose men; my nation is not yet large enough to stand much loss.

"My greatest danger, then, is that my enemies will come together and make up too strong a force to be conquered. That would mean the end of my people. So, when I hear of the Huambizas increasing the size of their war-parties and the power of their attacks, it is a matter of great concern to me. You all have been soldiers. You realize what I must do."

"Smash the enemy before he can get set," nodded McKay. "But see here——"

"Wait. Let me say it all and have done with it. Now I have not yet struck at the Huambizas, because they are farther away than the Jiveros, and I naturally attack the enemy nearest to me. Also, they help me without meaning to do so, by killing Jiveros at the west and south while I fight from the east and north. The Jiveros are between us. In the natural course it would be years—perhaps ten, perhaps more—before I should be ready to attack the Huambizas. But if some man is building the Huambizas into a solid fighting force I can not wait. I must cross the Jivero country, go into the Huambiza land, find this new peril, and smash it before it is organized strongly enough to strike at me!"

"How would you find it?" objected Knowlton. "Like hunting a needle in a haystack."

"Not so, *teniente*," José differed, with a grim smile. "I shall find a guide."

McKay glanced significantly at Nuné.

"Maybe she—" he suggested.

"No. She would not guide us. She is no fool, and she would know our war-party meant no good. Can you not see that she is in love with Señor Dave? I knew she was protecting some one at the last of her tale, and, since she had avoided mentioning the leader of whom I had heard, it must be he. Yet I am sore at heart to find that this Huambiza leader is Dave.

"I did not know he had come back until you told me so at the Jivero house. Then the thought of the Huambiza leader flashed into my head. But I told myself that it could not be he, and when the thought kept coming back I would not believe it. But now——"

He shrugged.

The three looked gloomily at nothing. Finally Knowlton said, as if the words were dragged out of him:

"His mind's gone back on him again. You remember, fellows—when we first found Dave he was——"

He left the sentence unfinished.

McKay arose and began pacing up and down, stiff-backed, soldierly, silent, his brow wrinkled in unpleasant thought. Tim stared dolefully at the table; then crashed a fist down on it.

"Crazy like a fox!" he gruffly disputed. "Lookit here! Dave's so slick you guys don't git what he's doin'. He was an Injun five years, yeah. Crazy, sure, he was, but when he got his brains runnin' right he didn't forgit his Injun stuff. We seen that, when he come up the Tigre with us afterward. All that ol' jungle stuff o' his was right on tap when he wanted to use it. Now he's usin' it! Makes these dummies think he's a white Injun and plays the game with 'em, so's to git the dope he come down here for. The boy's clever, I'll tell the world!"

"So clever that he lost all his equipment and his Quichua packers," dryly retorted McKay.

"Um! Begorry, ye're right. I forgot about that." Tim relapsed into silence.

Nuné moved. McKay, striding back and forth, was approaching her again. She stepped before him.

"Man with the black beard," she said, "does this white chief with the face of a hawk speak true? Do you seek in the land of my people a friend? Is Rana that friend, or is he your enemy?"

McKay met her questing gaze with a look searching, yet kindly.

"Rana is the man we seek," he answered. "He has been our friend, and we have sought him because we thought him to be lost. Now the great white chief feels that Rana has become his enemy. Yet we are still the friends of Rana; and we would reach him and have talk with him. Is Rana the friend of Nuné?"

"It is so," she replied, with direct simplicity. "Rana is a great fighting man and terrible to his enemies. Yet he is kind to Nuné, and the heart of Nuné turns to him."

"And why did not Rana protect Nuné from capture by the Jiveros?"

"He did not know. Nuné was alone in the forest."

"So. Now, Nuné has spoken of returning to her own people. She would go back to Rana?"

"It is so."

"And will Nuné lead us to Rana, that we may talk with him?"

She eyed him doubtfully.

"It is a long journey," she temporized. "And you are not friends to the men of the forest. They would not let you pass through to the place where Rana can be found."

"Then they must die. We must reach Rana."

"If you reach Rana," she challenged, "what comes after? Why would you talk with Rana?"

"Rana is not a Huambiza. He must return to his own people."

"His people are the Mayorunas of the Yavarí. He has said so. You are not men of the jungle. What have you to do with him and his people?"

"Rana must return to his own people!" repeated McKay.

The girl's eyes flashed.

"Then Nuné will not lead you to him! What Rana shall do is for Rana alone to decide. He came to us because he wished. He stays with us because he will. He is a man and knows his mind. You are not his friends! You would catch him and carry him away. Nuné will live and die a slave among Jiveros before she will lead you to kill her people and catch Rana!"

With that she turned from him and defiantly faced José, who was cynically watching the colloquy.

"And that's that!" commented Knowlton, with a faint smile. "Might have known it."

"Yeah. And the kid's dead right," grunted Tim. "'Tain't none of our funeral, at that. Dave come here on his own. He never asked us to come buttin' in. Seems to be takin' good care of himself, too; too danged good to suit Hozy, anyways. And if I was him and this li'l lady was mine, anybody that tried to yank me out o' here before I got ready to go would find himself up against a man-sized job, whether he was a friend o' mine or not. Looks like we'd better haul in our horns and beat it."

McKay and Knowlton glowered at him. Yet they could not deny that he was speaking the blunt truth. In the last analysis, the doings of David Rand were the business only of David Rand—at least, until they should become a menace to others. It was José, whose little kingdom already seemed to be menaced by those activities, who disagreed.

"Unfortunately I can not pull in my horns," he reminded them. "I have set myself to do here a piece of work, and I cannot allow the Huambizas to grow strong enough to wreck it. Before long I must act. And, whether Señor Dave likes it or not, comrades, if he can not be made to see reason he must be caught and carried away as the girl says. Otherwise he will be killed."

"Who by? You?" demanded Tim.

The Spaniard's face hardened again.

"If necessary—by me! It is much more likely that he will be killed by the savages. They are treacherous as snakes. Let him become hated by any one of them, and in the night——"

He flicked a finger across his throat.

"And if they spare him long, I can not. Any man who joins the enemies of my people becomes my own enemy, and must be treated as one. And a white man who joins hunters of heads—*caramba*, he is no more a white man! Before Señor Dave, *amigos*, are only two ends: capture or death."

STUDYING his grim jaw and inexorable eyes, the North Americans knew this son of the relentless Conquistadores would fulfil his threat to the letter. Like his indomitable forefathers, he would crush all obstacles to the achievement of his task. He would swerve for none. Nor, in all fairness, could he. Not merely his personal ambition, but the fate of his growing nation, was at stake. He was attempting a far greater work than had

his ancestors: not to loot and destroy a primitive civilization, but to create such a civilization in a stronghold of the most abysmal savagery of the world. His sword could know no friend.

Yet, as he turned again to Nuné, his tone was kindly.

"Nuné, you have spoken well," he said. "You are a brave girl. You shall not be a slave among Jiveros, nor among any others. You shall remain on this rock, in the house of the women, with all honor. For a time you must stay here. Do not try to go away, for it can not be done. But I promise you once more that in time you shall return to your own people if you will. Until that time, you shall be more safe among us than you would be among the Huambizas. Now go."

A sudden glow swept her face; but she made no answer. Toward the doorway, now growing shadowy in the swiftly gathering dusk, she turned. Then Tim halted her.

"Noonay!" he called, rising as he spoke. Then, to the others: "Grrrumph! Gittin' dark. She might step on a snake or somethin'. I'll jest trail along to see she gits there safe. Come on, girlie. Grab a holt o' the big man's arm. That's right. *Vamos, señorita—soy un buen hombre*—I'm a reg'lar feller——"

Aggressively he marched out, the amazed Nuné clinging to the arm on which he had masterfully put her hand—startled, but by no means alarmed, or even displeased. In fact, something very much like a girlish giggle sounded as they passed through the portal. And, behind them, the glum-faced men broke suddenly into a roar of mirth.

"By ——!" cackled José. "This girl of the head-hunters might not be able to pass unescorted to the house of my wives, no? She might step on a worm or— Ha! ha! ha! *Caramba*, it is time something happened to make us laugh, friends. Our faces are as long as crocodiles."

"It's no use, Tim," called Knowlton. "These jungle girls don't know what a kiss means."

"Zat so? Well, they might learn," floated back Tim's retort. "Don't let 'em bother ye, Noony. They're a gang o' rough-necks. Now, me, I'm different— Aw rats, I forgot ye dunno English. *Mira*, savvy *un beso*——"

The voices grew indistinct.

"*Un beso*, eh?" echoed McKay. "Naughty, naughty! He's asking for a kiss already. And she a priestess!"

"Well, God loves the Irish, so why shouldn't an amateur priestess? And maybe he'll convert her. If he should teach her something about kisses, she might change her mind about returning to the Huambizas."

"——, and that is not such a joke," grinned José. "Her blood is Spanish, beyond a doubt; and the girls of my race are likely to be swift to love when a man rouses them. The man who is far away may be quickly forgotten if the one who is near is a—ah——"

"Fast worker," supplied Knowlton. "And Tim's all of that. Dave might lose out after all. Hm! Come to think of it—I wonder if she's the reason why Dave's turned Huambiza! What do you think, Rod?"

McKay shook his head.

"Doubt it. He's hard-boiled. Could have taken his pick from a dozen society girls up home if he'd felt like it. Peaches, too."

"That doesn't prove anything. More than one fellow has passed up society dolls and fallen for a native girl."

"True. But she herself says he has only been kind to her. He hasn't fallen for her. It's the other way around."

"M-m, yes, you're right. Which leaves Dave without an excuse. What in the ——'s gotten into the man, anyway?"

McKay shrugged and made no answer.

The gloom now was rapidly deepening. José clapped his hands, and from the rear came an attendant bearing a torch. She passed about the room, lighting a number of palm-oil lamps. A soft glow lighted up the place.

"Let food be brought, and wine," commanded José. The girl withdrew. "And, my friends, let us be merry again. We know that Señor Dave lives, and that is much. We shall try to— *Hola!*"

The tapping of a spear-haft at the doorway halted his speech. At his bidding, the spearman entered, leaving his weapon outside. Behind him came a lean man, breathing fast and glistening with sweat, who drew from one ear-lobe a slender section of cane. This he handed silently to José.

A moment, and the Spaniard had extracted from the little tube a rolled paper

As he read the contents, a scowl gathered on his brow. A muttered exclamation broke from him. Again he read the note. Then he questioned the messenger, who showed every sign of a long, hard run.

Some minutes passed in question and answer. José stared thoughtfully at the outer dark. A brief, decisive order terminated the conversation. The pair strode out and turned toward the houses behind.

A moment, and the boom of the big *tunday* roared through the night. From afar floated an answer. Curt, authoritative, the home drum thumped a message. A pause, and the distant log began beating out the same cadence, note for note. At its completion José nodded.

Heavy steps without, and Tim entered on the run.

"What's up, kink? Got a fight comin' off?" he demanded hopefully. "Yer cannon busted up me taty-tate with the li'l priest—I was gittin' religion fast, too. What's doin'?"

"I wish I could tell you, *amigo*. I shall not know until we receive another visitor, whom I have ordered brought here. All I now know is that the country which hounded me out of it now speaks to me again. There has come a voice from the south and west—from Peru.

"Since I left that Peru beyond the mountains no man has heard my full name. So no man knows it except those beyond the mountains, and to them I have long been lost. Yet now comes this note, brought to my men by a Peruvian Indian, who says the writer of it waits alone at the Pastasa for a reply."

Translating, he read:

"Señor Don José Guillermo Monagas Martinez:

"With fervent wishes for your good health (and so on). I have the honor of requesting a conference with you at your most immediate convenience concerning a matter of the most great international importance. I have traveled many leagues and undergone many hardships in my effort to fulfil my orders in this regard, and I beg your most kind consideration.

"I have the honor to sign myself

"Your faithful servitor who kisses your hands,

"MANUEL V. D. R. MONTEZ,

"Lieutenant, Peruvian Force of Security of the East."

CHAPTER XI

THE MESSENGER

IN THE hall which José and his partners had hitherto used as dining-room and council-place, the King of the White Ones now sat in state. He and his people and his Northern guests awaited the arrival of the man from Peru.

Four more days had drifted past while the mysterious envoy, guided by men sent from the farthest outpost, made his way up into the hills. His progress had been reported by brief messages relayed through the *tunday* telegraph, and now he was close at hand. In the interim the visitors had rested from the toil of jungle travel, roamed about the settlement, and viewed the workings of the kingdom arising on the ruins of a lost city.

Wherever they passed along the byways, they had found vestiges of that people whose very name had vanished into the mists of time. Stone-heaps, thickly overgrown by tropical tangle but still revealing mossy corners or edges of square-cut blocks, were met at every few rods—mute monuments to a destroyed civilization and to the awful power of the still smouldering volcanic giants in the west. Only a short distance from each of these ruins was usually a palm-wood house and a small plantation of the present inhabitants, each beside a cold, clear little stream, and surrounded by fruit-trees which obviously had belonged to the people dwelling in the houses of stone.

Despite the prevalence of brooks, there were few mosquitoes, as the water was always in motion toward a central creek possessing a subterranean outlet, and stagnant pools were virtually non-existent. The air, too, was constantly moving in fresh breezes, and in the shade of the trees it was delightfully cool. The healthfulness of the location could hardly be surpassed. At no place did the ramblers see man, woman, or child who showed the slightest sign of sickness.

Everywhere the plantation work was done by the Jivero women, always under guard. Yet the observers saw no sign of harshness in their treatment, and at times they found the workers laughing over some simple incident of their toil. They began to suspect that, for his own purposes, José had vastly exaggerated to Nuné the severity with which these prisoners were treated. Certainly they looked sleek and strong, and they worked in leisurely fashion. Few of them were visible at the homes, where the household tasks seemed to be carried on by the women of the White Ones. The only idlers there were the mothers of tiny babes, and even these were usually keeping an eye on older children.

The warriors of the place, though now at home with no new raid in immediate prospect, were by no means lolling about. Some were found carefully instructing boys in fighting craft. Others were seen, in small parties, bringing home heavy loads of game killed outside the valley. Still others were met maneuvering in simulated war-movements, directed by chiefs or sub-chiefs.

Once, in passing along an apparently empty path, the three suddenly found themselves surrounded by a dozen men, armed with machetes, who had leaped like jaguars from the bush and caught them flat-footed. One of them was the grinning Curac, who, by a few Spanish words and expressive gestures, explained that it was a joking test of his men: They had seen the visitors coming, and he had ordered the ambush in order to see which of them was quickest. The Americans, who had instinctively reached for their side-arms, laughed and inwardly thanked their stars that they had left their gun-belts on the rock; for the sudden menace of a gun might have precipitated an automatic retaliation converting the jest into earnest. Even the jokes of these people, it was evident, sprang from the one fixed motive of their every thought and act—war.

On the first morning after their arrival, too, they witnessed another proof of the soldierly qualities of the men and of the grip on them of their ruler. Before the house gathered a number of warriors with complaints, grievances, or problems for settlement in court; and, seated in his tall chair, José heard each case. There was no wrangling, no argument, no apparent animosity; each man stated his side in straightforward fashion and awaited judgment. In each instance José considered a moment before giving his verdict, then gave it briefly and finally. The men faced about and withdrew without a word. Their king had spoken; that ended the matter.

The bruskness of the departure of these men moved Tim, when the session ended, to lodge a humorous complaint against the simplicity of the Spaniard's rule.

"Hozy, this here kingdom o' yourn ain't classy enough," he declared. "Lookit them fellers, now; they turn their backs on ye like ye was nobody. Ye'd oughter train 'em to bump their cocos nine times on the floor and go backin' out with a nose-bleed in honor o' yer majesty. And ye'd oughter wear a gold stove-pipe crown and a long giddy night-shirt and set away up on a throne with steps to it and some o' these here undressed girls layin' round on the steps, and a skipper in yer hand——"

"A what?" snickered Knowlton.

"A skipper. Ye know, a kind of a club the king holds out to make 'em skip——"

"Oh. A scepter. Go on."

"Yeah. And a lot o' dancin'-girls, king; ye sure oughter have them. Kind o' jazz up the place, y'understand. Now it ain't nothin' but an army camp."

"Quite true, friend—that is all it is," laughed José. "And though my men turn their backs to me, they do not turn them to the enemy; and I would rather have them knock other men on the head than knock their own on the floor. As for the other things, I do not care to bother with them. Yet I have a crown somewhere—or had one—I must ask Huarma to find it, for I mean to wear it when Lieutenant Manuel Montez arrives. Whoever he is, he is a pair of eyes for the land beyond the mountains, and when he comes I shall give him something to look at."

And now, with the stranger at his gates, José was keeping his promise. At first sight of him that morning, Tim gasped.

"Hot dog! Look who's here!" he ejaculated. "The King o' the Cannibal Islands, and then some! Kink, I take back every danged word I said. Ye're the goods. Who dressed ye?"

"My wives," chuckled José.

"Faith, ye look it."

"But no, it is unfair to blame my wives for this. I had these things made to wear once each year at a *fiesta* of my people. It pleases them at that time to see their king shine. Now I have simply put them on again to impress the visitor."

"Ye'll knock his eye out, I'll tell the world."

Compared to the plain garments he had hitherto worn, the present raiment of King José was indeed brilliant. His shirt and trousers were of priceless feather-work, the golden breast-feathers of toucans having been woven so cunningly into a web of bark-cloth that from throat to ankles he seemed a golden idol. Only at his waist was there a contrasting shade, and it was striking: A crimson sash, formed by the use of red feathers instead of yellow ones. Whatever the red and yellow may have meant to the White Ones, they were also the colors of Spain.

The crown now resting on the potentate's glossy black hair, too, was Spanish and not Indian; for whereas an Indian chief would surely have worn tall plumes, this man carried on his head only a broad band of beaten gold. And the lean, deep-eyed, eagle-featured face between golden feathers and golden crown was that not only of a Spaniard, but of a Conquistador. For all his jungle panoply, he was every inch a white man; and, for all his jesting, the proud set of his head was that of a man whose word was law.

"I shall give him something to think about," he answered Tim. "Every man of mine within this place is to show himself, with all his weapons, somewhere along the path where the lieutenant shall walk—not as if set there to be seen, but as if he were only one of many more farther back. When he has passed, they are to slip along back paths and gather in the cleared space ahead of him, so that he may see what seems to be another big force of fighters. I am borrowing a trick from the Jiveros, every one of whom always yells in several different tones in attacking a place, so that their force seems much greater than it is. If this man in truth comes to speak of international matters, he shall carry back a tale of a nation that shall make his superiors think."

Presently, from the cliffs to the north, floated two strokes of the *tunday*.

"He enters," said José. "No, do not go. You shall be a part of the play, if you wish. Sit about the table. You are—let me see—my ambassadors from America, England and—ah——"

"Ireland," finished Tim. "Only don't tell me which o' these other guys is the Englishman. I don't want to scrap with either of 'em."

BANTERING one another, they lounged at ease until there came a sound at the door. Through it stalked ten tall warriors, wearing high bonnets of parrot-plumes and swinging long lances of polished *chonta*-wood tipped with steel. They were the reserve members of the guard—the men who never left the rock. Without orders, they ranged themselves behind José, grounded their spear-hafts, and stood motionless—a strikingly effective barbaric background to the golden king. The white men straightened up. From the direction of the path came the faint slither of other bare feet. Then entered the harsh-faced Aillu, carrying a rifle. Behind him came a bronzed, thin-faced, travel-stained Spaniard, followed by half a dozen more of the Sumatara warriors. The latter stopped at the door.

Aillu, retaining the rifle—which was not his own, but that of the newcomer—halted at the foot of the table. The Peruvian slowed. José and his mates, seated about the head of the great board, arose.

"*Bienvenido*—welcome!" spoke the king, with quiet dignity. "You have come far. Will you rest and eat before you speak of your business?"

For a moment the other stopped and stared. The striking figure of the king, backed by his bonneted guards, evidently had made a deep impression. But then, with a bold swagger that might have been copied from José himself in some moods, he advanced again.

"*Gracias*. But no," he answered. "I have been long on the way, and I shall rest better when my word is said."

His voice was metallic, his thin lips a bit cruel, his black eyes keen and calculating, his gaze unwinking. In one quick sweep he took in the three North Americans. Those three, sizing him up in turn, felt that the trick of José in exhibiting—and multiplying—his force had not been wasted. The black eyes were spying everything within their range.

"*Bien*. As you will," replied José. "Sit, and say on."

He sat down. So did the Americans. But Montez, before availing himself of the seat beside him, drew from an inner pocket a small rubber envelope and laid it before José.

"From my commander," he explained, "to show that I am who I say I am."

With that he sat down as if somewhat weary.

"*Bueno*. Have you a knife, Rodrigo? This is sealed."

McKay's pocket-knife slit the flap of the water-proofed container. From it José drew a folded sheet. As he perused it, the girl Saquina appeared from the rear, bearing the wine-jar and a clay cup, which she placed beside the visitor. While she poured a cupful of wine the eyes of Montez dwelt on her comely face and half-nude figure. His thin lips stretched a trifle; and as she walked gracefully away his intent gaze

followed her. José, glancing up, caught on his face an expression that made his own eyes quickly narrow.

"*Perfectamente*," he dryly remarked. "The letter is perfectly correct. Coronel Teófilo Ramirez—of whom I never have heard—introduces you as one bearing words which you will communicate to me, and asks my courtesy to you and your men. Where are the men?"

Montez, with a flourish toward his host, gulped the wine and licked his lips.

"Dead," he callously replied. "We were twelve—I and two *soldados* and nine *Indios*. Now we are one *teniente*—myself—and one *Indio*. We met some Jiveros."

"*Sí?* That is a pity. By what way did you come?"

"We came up the Morona, then by land to Canelos. It was on the land march that we were in trouble. I shall not return by that way, but by the Pastasa. It was necessary first to visit Canelos in order to learn how best to find you."

"And they told you?"

"*Sí*," grinned Montez. "You are not loved there, Don José. I let them believe that I sought to capture you—alive or dead—and they sped me on my way. These *señores* are the *Norte Americanos* of whom I was told?"

"We are," growled McKay. "Were you to kill or capture us also?"

"*No quiera Dios!* God forbid! It was not known that you had reached Don José. You were spoken of. That is all."

He stared boldly at them, and they stared straight back, leaving the next move to José. He soon made it.

"What is this matter of such great importance?" he asked. "I cannot understand why the commander of a Peruvian force should send a man to me, who am not a Peruvian."

The stare of Montez widened and became blank.

"Not a Peruvian!" he ejaculated. "Not—are you not the José Martinez to whom that letter is addressed?"

"The name is mine. But to Peru I am dead. I now am King José, ruler of my own land; the land which belongs to neither Péru nor Ecuador, but to the White Ones, whom I rule."

Montez leaned again on the table, grinning in relief. Deliberately he poured another drink. When the cup again was empty he looked José squarely in the eye and moved his head significantly toward the Americans.

"You have touched on the very matter of which I mean to speak," he said. "And perhaps it would be to your liking to talk more privately."

"These are my friends. Whatever is to be said can be said before them."

"*Bien.* Then I must mention that some years ago an unfortunate misunderstanding came about between you and Don Francisco Pecoro Torrico, after which Don Francisco—died. It was just after his death that you came eastward——"

"You are forgetting something. Three other men died—all at once; three *asesinos* hired by the greasy Francisco to murder me. Then Francisco, after firing twice at me, died also."

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten the other three; they were of no importance. But Don Francisco was of such position in the government that you very wisely departed. The officials were greatly vexed about the matter—particularly the brother of the deceased, the General Diego León Torrico; so that the army was instructed to shoot you if possible. But, fortunately, it was not possible.

"Now, time makes great changes, Don José. Some time ago, General Torrico died. New officials have been appointed since the last election. And it has been learned that you are alive. After living for years in this horrible wilderness, you are, without doubt, yearning to return to your home and your friends and live as a gentleman should. We feel that some injustice may have been done—yes, that Don Francisco received only what he deserved. So, if you wish to cooperate with the government, I can promise you that the Torrico matter will be forgotten. And, more than that, I am empowered to offer you the commission of *capitán* in the army of Peru!"

CHAPTER XII

THE LURE

FOR a moment José sat like a golden image. Behind him, stark and motionless, the spearmen stood like attendant statues. McKay and Knowlton and Tim, to whom the outlaw had so recently confessed his heart-hunger for the land he had

left behind him, turned their eyes to his face. José himself stared straight down the board, at whose foot stood his stony-featured captain, Aillu. And Aillu, understanding none of the words but sensing the development of something affecting his king, leaned forward with eyes glued to his commander.

Perhaps it was the sight of that devoted veteran's tense readiness that steadied José in the face of this staggering offer. At any rate, when he spoke it was in a dry tone giving no hint of its effect on him.

"Your letter spoke of matters of international importance. I see nothing of such importance in this offer. And the offer itself comes rather late."

A shade of disappointment passed over the other Spanish face. Such a nonchalant reception of his craftily dramatic announcement was obviously unexpected and unwelcome to Montez. But he proceeded without delay to place his cards on the table.

"I have told you first the thing which seemed most likely to interest you," he said, "for all of us are interested first in our own fortunes, yes? But now I shall speak of the matter which, as you shall see, is of importance to at least two governments.

"You have just said, Don José, that this land east of the Andes and north of the Amazon belongs to neither Peru nor Ecuador. But there are other minds which do not agree to that. As you know, Ecuador claims that all this land is its Provincia del Oriente, or Eastern Province, and that our Peru owns nothing north of the Amazon. But we of Peru do not allow this, and our government places our northern boundary at the Rio Yapura, north of the Rio Putumayo. And again, the government of Colombia does not agree to this, but swears that the Yapura and all the upper Putumayo belong to Colombia. So all this great land between the Andes and the Amazon, of more than two hundred thousand square miles, rich in gold and rubber and precious roots and priceless woods and other things, is always in dispute.

"Now, because of the difficulties of travel and the hostility of the accursed *Indios*, no settlement of this Oriente has been possible, and because there was no settlement of the land there was no decision of the dispute. But of late this insolent Ecuador has been making moves which show she intends to bring it under her control. So we of Peru also are making moves."

He paused, shrewdly scanning the four listeners. None spoke or betrayed more than casual interest. So he resumed his statement.

"This Ecuador is moving to conquer the land by overcoming the hardships of travel. She is moving through the mountains with a railroad, which already has been built as far as Pelileo, and which she means to bring through the forest to that miserable pueblo of Canelos; and if it is ever completed she probably will make Canelos a large town and try to run boats on the Rio Bobonaza and the Pastasa to the Amazon. So this little kingdom of yours will then be under the power of Ecuador, and you yourself may take orders from a house-eating Indian governor put over you by the so-great Cortes of Ecuador!"

This stab struck home. Red wrath shot across the face of the outlaw king. For a moment he glared. But he controlled himself.

"I think not," he said, in a tone of repressed passion. "Go on."

"*Bien*. There are other signs, too, of what Ecuador means to do. We have learned that only recently there have been men in the Napo region seeking signs of oil. They were *Norte Americanos*. And it may be of interest to you, Don José, that the railroad creeping toward you is the work of *Norte Americanos*. The *Norte Americanos* and Ecuador work together to conquer this Oriente for what they may gain." Once more he glanced at the three foreigners. "Perhaps, Don José, I am late in reaching you, and these *señores* from the west have already——"

There he paused.

The implication was offensively plain, and so was its purpose; to arouse in the mind of José distrust of these three *Norte Americanos* whose business here was unknown to Montez. McKay glowered and moved as if to rise. José turned to him.

"Do not honor him by noticing him, Rodrigo," he said in English. "Let him think what he likes."

To Montez he said:

"You are quite wrong. Talk of things which you know."

"No offense is intended, *señores!*" Montez hastened to cover up his false step. "I have only the welfare of my country at heart, and I know that Ecuador is reaching, always reaching. Let me go on.

"We of Peru have better sight than Ecuador. We know that the greatest trouble is not in the matter of travel—although that is indeed bad—but in the overcoming of the savages; for those *infideles* can destroy any road, any boat, and the men who travel on it. So we begin at the other end of the difficulty. Already we control the north bank of the Amazon—all its towns are Peruvian. We are a humane people"—he smirked—"and we have long tried to become friendly with the *Indios*. We have tried too long. Now we tire of it. You, Don José, must know what became of Borja, on the Amazon, before you and I were born."

The king nodded, with a rather bored air.

"Ah yes, of course," he said. "The Peruvian government established there a colony of several hundred people, with everything complete, and with a river-steamer for communication with Iquitos. Within a few months the Huambizas attacked it and killed or carried away every inhabitant. Even the houses were destroyed. That was about sixty years ago."

"It is so. And the condition is the same today as it was then. I am of the outpost established near the Morona by our government to hold that land under the Peruvian flag—but I am not of the first force sent there. That first troop was visited by the Huambiza snakes. They came pretending friendship. The *capitán* of the troop was so deceived by them that he showed the leader of the *Indios* how to use his gun. And that chief shot the *capitán* with his own weapon, and the other *Indios* killed all the troop and carried off their heads. That was about ten years ago—in February of 1913—and since that time they have tried to play the same trick on us; for we hold the same place where that other troop was massacred. But we are not so simple, and we still live.

"Now it is very plain that those *barbaros* never can be trusted and always will hold back our country from taking what belongs to her. So there is only one way to handle them. And that, Don José, is what brings me to you. It seems that your wisdom and clear sight is greater than that of our commanders beyond the mountains, and that you have already done the thing of which they have only talked; that is, to make war on the *barbaros* and continue it without mercy. It is only recently that we have heard of you——"

"In what way?" José cut in.

"From a trader, one Pepe Otero, who knew you years ago and since then has sold you guns and cartridges."

"Ah. So Pepe talks. He will sell me nothing more. But Pepe knows nothing of my life beyond the mountains."

"True. But he knows your appearance and your name of José Martinez, and it happens that we have an excellent description of the Don José Martinez who—ah—caused Don Francisco Torrico to—ah—go elsewhere. Ha ha! As I was saying, we feel that so valiant a fighter as yourself should not be lost to Peru—a true Conquistador, *caramba*, of whom our country may well be proud! So we offer you, not only amnesty and full guarantee of safety, but honor; a captaincy, which soon may easily become a much higher rank—yes, that of general! It is necessary only that you continue to fight the Jivero and Huambiza snakes as you are doing now. And that surely is but little to ask."

The deep eyes of the outcast dwelt on him. In them grew a warm glow. Then, for the first time, the saturnine face relaxed in a smile, which became a laugh of rare enjoyment.

"*Por Dios!* It is too rich!" he gurgled. "Comrades, did you ever hear the like? Forgiveness, freedom, and honor from the land that hounded me into the swamps of Brazil, and I am asked only to continue my chosen work! It is too good! Yes—" his laugh ended abruptly— "it is too good—to be true! What surety have I, *señor*, that all this is truth? Have you official papers to prove it?"

"None—as yet," admitted Montez. "But they shall come in time. You will understand that I have traveled in some danger of being killed, and one never knows what may become of a paper. Even in such savage jungle, it might crawl by crooked ways to the hands of Ecuadoreans, and such is not our desire. And—I am honest with you, Don José—this action is not yet sanctioned by our Government. It is the idea of Colonel Ramirez, my commander. But you may be sure that the recommendations of the colonel, when received by the Government, will be approved."

José probed his direct gaze, then nodded. For a few minutes he stared absently at the farthest wall, pleasant thoughts flowing through his mind. Montez quietly poured

himself another drink, watching him all the time.

"*Bien*," said José at length. "In what way is the Government to profit by my becoming again a Peruvian?"

"In this way," was the ready reply. "We, on the Morona, intend to request a large increase of forces. We shall send fast runners informing the Government that you, with a strong force and a strategic center, now fight westward; that we must have heavy reinforcements and shall begin a campaign eastward; that we thus shall have the savages between the jaws of a trap; that we must crush the *infieles*—exterminate them—and hold this land by right of conquest. Knowing this, the Government will without doubt impress all available men and rush the campaign. If necessary, we shall try to increase your forces also. In the end, Peru will hold all this region—and hold it forever. Let the Ecuadorean pigs squeal. This shall be the land of Peru!

"And the reward of the Government to her son Don José Martinez will be great, beyond a doubt. José Martinez, whose first blows started the conquest of the East! José Martinez, Conquistador! *Carambal* Men have become presidents of the republic for actions less notable! *Por Dios!* José Martinez—President of Peru!"

HE BOUNDED up, extending his cup, and, with a dramatic flourish, drank it off and hurled the cup to the floor. José half rose, his face aflame; then caught himself and sank back, masking the sudden exaltation aroused by the toast. Once more he held himself quiet—though rigid—in his chair. When Montez, fired now by the wine and his own eloquence, began again to declaim, the king stopped him.

"Be quiet," he commanded. "Let me think."

Montez sank back, scowling a little. José stared again at the wall. Presently he began musing aloud:

"So the government of Peru would use my forces to win control of El Oriente. And, having won, it would reward my services. Don José would go back as a conqueror to his own people. Ah, yes. To his relatives and to——

"Señor Montez, you seem to know much of the matter which brought me eastward. There was a girl—Dolores. Do you know anything of her?"

"*Sí.* The Señorita Dolores Delavega. I know that she was yours, and it was because of her that Don Francisco sought to—remove you. She now is one of the holy sisterhood, and is seen no more by the world."

"Ah. I have often wondered." José sighed. "So she is in the convent, and that is the end of her."

"So it is, Don José. But there are many other beautiful *señoritas* who will gladly be gracious to the lion of the east. Yes, fair maidens of the highest birth."

"Perhaps. Yet I have devoted women here with me. And men, too, who are faithful to death."

"Ah, of course. The *Indios*. A man must amuse himself. And you have done marvelous work in making such soldiers. But the *Indios* were made only for the use of white men, and when they have served their purpose one need think no more of them."

An enigmatical smile flitted over the lips of José and was gone. He went on as if the other had not spoken:

"And so José leaves the jungle behind him. And into this jungle come many new men who never fought to gain it. They gather many tons of rubber, they search for gold and roots and every valuable thing. And the Government profits greatly by what they find. And since they must have laboring men for all their work, they force all the *Indios* they can find to be their beasts. They rob and cheat and abuse the men of the forest; they drive them with whip and club; they amuse themselves with the women of those men; and those *Indios* who dare to resent such civilized treatment are shot like dogs.

"So these very men who stand behind me now—these White Ones who help win the new country for the Government—are crushed into the dirt and forgotten; for the first thing done by the Government authorities will be to disarm them and leave them helpless in the hands of the brave newcomers who never fought a Jivero, but who are very valiant at torturing Indians who are tame. And all this is the work of José Martinez, who betrayed the people who trusted him."

"But no! The *Indios*——"

"But yes! I have been years in the jungle, and I know what comes to the

Indian at the hands of the white man. And as his reward for this great work, José has the freedom of his own land to the west and the favors of white women—and he bows his neck to the orders of the Government whenever it wishes to use him further. *Bien.* Now suppose, señor, that I refuse to accept this so-wonderful offer; that I refuse to help the Government to conquer this region; that I continue to act as I see fit. What then?"

"Then we must find our help elsewhere. We must try to make use of the Huambizas to destroy the Jiveros—and all others who oppose us. They are treacherous, yes; but if they are rewarded most generously they may work with us until all foes are crushed. Then we must turn on the Huambizas—as they will turn on us—and crush them also. So, in the end, we win. And you——"

"Ah. So I must fight either on the side of the Government or against it. If I am not your ally I am your enemy. I shall not be left free in either case."

"That would be a matter of deep regret to us, Don José, but——"

"I see."

José did not move. Yet he seemed to grow taller, wider, more formidable. His face became stone. His voice turned harsh as the grating of rock against rock.

"You have spoken well. You are a bold and brave man to make this journey. So far as I may, I shall give you protection on your return. Men of mine shall go with you to the Pastasa. You will start back as soon as you have eaten.

"Say to your commander that José Martinez is king in his own land; that he will fight, not as a servant of Peru nor of Ecuador nor of any other Government, but as the king of a new nation; that he has chosen his course and will not change it if all the world comes against him with all its armies; that he will remain king of his people, and king of himself, to the end!

"That is all."

CHAPTER XIII

DREAM'S END

MONTEZ was gone.

His departure had been both unwilling and unhonored. Unwilling, because he had hoped to prolong his visit for two purposes: to argue José into reconsideration, and to pick up all possible knowledge regarding the stronghold of the White Ones. Unhonored, because the deceptive exhibition of jungle troops which had marked his arrival was not repeated on his withdrawal.

José, his decision made and his ultimatum spoken, had refused either to hear more talk or to permit spying. The visitor had not been allowed to leave the council-room even to eat; a meal had been put before him there, and at its end he had been marched straight to the cliff-path and down and out. Attended only by Aillu and the escort which had brought him in, he had passed back to the entry cañon without seeing more than a dozen Indians. José knew that although Montez might have looked twice at the same faces without suspicion, he would hardly fail to smell a trick if he should meet them four times; and he would be using his eyes more keenly on his departure, since his mind would no longer be filled with his message to the king. Wherefore the retreating messenger trod a virtually empty path, vainly scanning the baffling forest and striving to estimate the number of men concealed therein.

After his going, the man who sent him forth was silent and moody. With only a nod to his companions and a sign to his handful of warriors, he strode out and left them to themselves.

"By George, he's a man!" exclaimed Knowlton.

"We've known that for some time," observed McKay.

"Sure. But think of turning down the one thing he's been longing for, just for the sake of making good with this bunch of Indians. Now he's burned all his bridges; condemned himself for life. 'Among Indians I must live, and in the jungle I must die!' "

"Yeah. But listen here. If he did quit his own gang now he'd be a deserter," Tim pointed out. "He'd be yeller. And it ain't in him to be yeller—either now or tomorrer or the next day. One thing about Hozy, he's always figgerin' on tomorrer and the day after. Most guys in his place would have been satisfied to look at tomorrer—meanin' the day when he could go back west and be a swell again. But he had to look way past that and see what would happen the day after tomorrer, and that spoilt tomorrer. Spoilt this here, now, Monty's

game, too. Say, cap, d'ye s'pose that P'roo bunch'll really hook up now with them Warm Beezers?"

"The Huambizas? No chance. That was a bluff," answered McKay. "The Huambizas would just collect their heads——"

"Great Scott! Listen, Rod!" This from Knowlton, who had started as if struck by an astounding thought. "You know the Huambizas have been on the rampage lately. We've been blaming it on Dave. Maybe it goes further back, and this scheming Colonel Ramirez is behind it. His object is to get everybody in this region to kill off somebody else. Playing both ends against the middle. Double-crossing all hands."

The tall Scot and the stocky Irishman stared and scowled. McKay grudgingly nodded.

"Might be. When it comes to international land-grabbing there's no trick too dirty to use," he conceded. "But Dave—where does he come in? He's certainly not a tool of Peru."

"No. That's impossible. All the same—Confound it, we've got to yank Dave out of there somehow!"

Knowlton bounced up and began prowling to and fro.

"Yeah. That's right. And our best bet is ol' Hozy here. He'll be startin' somethin' right away, I bet ye, and our game is to trail along. It's the only chance we got."

McKay nodded again. Knowlton said nothing. Tim arose and ambled outward; cast an eye about, seeking José; saw nothing of him, and drifted toward the house where dwelt the women and children. As he approached it he stopped, listening; then turned and trotted back.

"Hey! Come and listen," he stage-whispered.

They followed. Nearing the family-house, they slowed. Soft and low, from somewhere within that home floated the strains of a violin.

In mournful minors, these notes reached into the hearts of the wanderers who had just seen their old-time comrade stalk silently from the conference in which he had renounced all hope of seeing again the land of his birth. Slowly they went on to the deserted piazza, and there they leaned in the shade, feeling like eavesdroppers listening to a confession. The player was not repeating any known air; he was putting into strange, haunting music what he would never put into words—a pathos which no words could convey. And the men outside, as the bow continued to drift over the plaintive strings, saw and heard and felt the same vision as the man within.

A land of darkness and of silences, wherein crawled savage rivers and crept nameless creatures of the gloom. The drip and drizzle of rain; the sough of lonely winds; the brief cries of stricken bird or beast or man. Far on the horizon, a wall of mountains touched with golden sun. Down in the mist and murk of the forest, a man who struggled toward the mountains—and was clutched and held by shadowy tentacles reaching for him amid the gloom. One by one those merciless coils fastened upon him until he was held powerless. The sunlit hills faded into dimness; the light itself died out; the forest and the man were swallowed in a vast black void. Then the music itself died into silence.

But presently it stole again into the air. The mists thinned out. The strangling, clutching monster enwrapping the man loosed its hold. He passed onward—no longer striving toward the vanished mountains, but marching with inexorable tread into a land peopled by demons. Behind him now glided other men: first a few, then more and more, then an army; strong, lithe, deep-eyed, firm-jawed men who, like their leader, turned aside for nothing. Came the clash and shock of battle. The demons, swarming with hideous grimaces into the mêlée, fell back and went down. And then the great forest was flooded with light—the same sunlight which had glowed on the unattainable heights. And over all swelled a pæan of triumph, through which sounded the rhythmic beat of drums, the roar of exulting warriors, the laughter of women and the shouts of happy children—the throbbing, thrilling battle-song of a victorious nation.

AGAIN the violin was silent. It spoke no more. Presently footsteps sounded softly within, and through the doorway came a pair of young women carrying tiny mites of humanity which stared round-eyed at the quiet men leaning against the posts. The women, too, looked with some surprize at the visitors, but not with so much interest as they received in return. One of them was a young wife of

José, with her latest-born; the other was Nuné, in whose arms the babe lay as restfully as if in the embrace of his own mother. Once more, in some indefinable way, the strange girl from the land of the head-hunters seemed to have changed. With the naked infant resting against her bosom, she who had been priestess and nymph and charmer now was a Madonna.

"José?" questioned Knowlton, gesturing toward the interior and thus explaining their presence.

"He will come," briefly replied the young wife.

Making no effort to summon the master, she sank into a hammock. Nuné remained standing. With evident reluctance, she surrendered her own burden to the mother, who nonchalantly took it with a free arm. Straightening, the girl turned to Tim, speaking with the directness of an Indian and a familiarity which showed that she regarded him as her best acquaintance there.

"Teem, the man is gone? Who was he?"

"A man from the Morona."

"Morona! He had news of my people?"

"No!"

"Teem, you do not speak truth! A man of the Morona must know of my people. Unless he was of Macas. Was he a *Padre?*"

"No. A bad man from far down by the Amazon."

"A bad man! And he was allowed to go? He was not killed?"

"No. Ask Hozy. Here he is." Relapsing into his usual speech, he added: "Jest in time, Hozy. I'm gittin' pumped, and I dunno how much ye want her to know. Give her the dope yerself."

José, emerging from the inner shadow, was himself again. His crown and his feathered garments were gone, and he was once more garbed in his slouchy bark-clothes. Moreover, his head was high and his face alight with good humor. With only a glance at Nuné, he stepped to the hammock, deftly picked one of the royal mites from the mother's breast and lifted it high in the air.

"Make haste, little prince, and grow!" he exhorted. "The time is short, for already men seek to steal away your father and make of him a monkey. Soon he will grow old, and then you and your brothers must protect him. Hurry, little rascal, and grow big!"

With terrifying speed he swung the babe down again, stopping it as lightly as a feather above its mother's bosom, then laying it gently in her arms. Though the little fellow's eyes had opened wide, he made no whimper. Contentedly he cuddled beside his twin. José stretched his arms wide and laughed.

"Behold, the devil came to King José," he said, "and put into his hands the desire of his heart. And behold, when the king had that thing before his nose, it began to smell bad. And he handed it back to the devil, and pushed the devil out of his house, and played a tune on his fiddle, and so it ended."

"No regrets?" quizzed McKay.

"No regrets, comrade. Indeed, I am most heartily glad. I had a dream which tormented me much, and now it is gone, and it will come back no more. Why? Because it was born of bitterness, and the bitterness was born from the fact that I could not go back. Now I have had the power to go back if I willed; yes, I have had the satisfaction of being begged to go back by the very Government that cast me out; and of my own will I refused. And the torment has ended, for the bitterness has died.

"I know now that I should not be happy in the land beyond the mountains. This jungle, where I have suffered much and which I have bitterly cursed many a time, would haunt me to my grave. It would call to me, and it would curse me as I have cursed it, because I betrayed it for a dream. It is a fierce, cruel old mistress, but it has been more kind to me than the land of my youth. So I shall be faithful to it, and to the men and women and children it has given me."

Again he looked affectionately at the little family group. Then he turned to Nuné. Thoughtfully he studied her.

"Nuné, is it still your desire to leave this place?" he asked. "Do you wish to go forth alone and travel the many long leagues through the forest, to become again a wandering servant of Piatzo among the Huambizas?"

The girl was silent. Her dark eyes dwelt on the verdant hills forming the wall of the stronghold, visualizing the weary leagues of menacing jungle stretching away beyond; the fearful struggle of plodding on and on and on, soon exhausting the little food she could carry and then being forced to subsist

like an animal on what small life she could kill; the black nights alone and shelterless, the unbridged streams, the prowling Jivero and jaguar, the myriad hardships and dangers of the long traverse. Unconsciously her fingers stole within her dress to the crude cross given her by the mad priest. When at length she spoke, it was with an effort—

"Nuné must return to her people."

"Must?" repeated José. "Must? In her heart Nuné does not wish to go."

She sighed. Her gaze went to Tim. Then she looked down at the ground.

"Do these three remain here?" she asked in a small voice.

"For a time only. Then they go to their own land, which is far away."

Her head lifted again. Once more she looked at the three; and now her gaze was impersonal and cool. Once more she said—and said with firm decision—

"Nuné returns to her people."

"*Bien.* So it shall be. But Nuné does not go alone. Soon we go to Rana. Nuné goes with us."

A quick light filled her face, succeeded by a shadow of distrust. But her reply was simple and serene.

"It is well."

Without another look at any of the four, she passed through the doorway and was gone.

"And that's the way it goes," sighed Tim, half-humorously. "Every time I git me a girl she leaves me flat for somebody else. But every time I look at a poor married guy worryin' about his family—yeah, even you, Hozy—I think mebbe I'm a lucky boob at that. Lucky in love, that's me; I don't never git married and spoil the fun o' livin'. Did I hear ye say somethin' about movin' west, kink? When do we pull out?"

"Very soon. As soon as I can make ready. And then we move fast—and strike hard."

His tone was grim. Tim's face grew sober, and he eyed José curiously. The others, too, became grave, probing the expression on the ominous countenance of the fighting king. Now that his torturing dream of return to his native land was ended, would he be more ruthless than ever in pursuing his later dream of conquest? Would he, if he reached David Rand, slay him as remorselessly as any other Huambiza? If he did, more than one hope centering on that wild man would be slain also; and so would one long-existent fact—their friendship for José Martinez.

While they studied him, he returned an inflexible, unreadable gaze which seemed to search their own minds. Then he turned from them and reentered the house. They stood a moment longer, then drifted back toward their own quarters, saying not a word.

CHAPTER XIV

FORWARD

OVER the rim of the mountain wall leered the ghostly visage of War. Invisible, intangible, yet real as the rocky steeps themselves, it hung about the outer jungle and watched the movements of the people within the bowl. And day after day there arose from the homes of the White Ones, like a tribute, a steady haze of smoke.

That grinning fantom, always lurking near, had lifted its head at the bidding of the Spaniard who ruled the region. The smokes, too, had begun to rise at the word of the hawk-faced king. It had been a very simple matter, devoid of any such ceremony or mysticism as might, in more ancient times, have attended the conjuring of an all-powerful shade from the realm of spirits. The king had merely summoned to his eyrie his chiefs and their sub-chiefs and spoken briefly to the conclave, and the thing was done.

The smokes were those of undying cook-fires preparing the campaign-food for an army. The army itself was, in small detachments, ranging the forest for miles in all directions, silently warring with blow-gun and arrow on the little people of the upper world—monkeys. Other animals, and birds too, were slain and brought home by the killers, but such meat was devoted only to the present needs of the families. Of the rich red monkey-flesh not an ounce was eaten. All of it went into the clay stew-pots bubbling over the flames.

The women of the White Ones were working now. For the nonce, the children got scant attention. In fact, the older children too were all at work. While their mothers presided at the pots, the boys became butchers, skinning and cutting up the animals dumped on the floors by their male elders; and the girls, sitting beside piles o

boiled yuca root, chewed and chewed and chewed.

"To make an army, one must have three things—men, and weapons, and food," José commented. "Men without weapons have little power, and men without food have no power at all. If you will come down below, friends, I think I can show you something new in the way of food for fighting men."

"You'll have to go some," laughed Knowlton. "When we were in France we stowed away some weird stuff."

On entering a smoky Sumatara house and observing a pile of freshly cut meat, he added:

"Nothing new about this, José. We've smoked monkey-meat many a time."

"Ah, *sí*. But look more closely, *amigo*. This is not being smoked."

"Oh, I see. Stewing it. But it won't keep."

"No?"

From a little pile of what seemed short lengths of firewood, José picked one at random. As he held it up, the others saw that it was a section of bamboo, and that the ends were capped.

"There is your meat," he said. "See. Yonder more meat stews. When all strength is boiled from the meat, the bones and the shreds are thrown out and the liquor is boiled down——"

"Hm! Meat extract!"

"That is it. A pure paste, with pepper and other spices, sealed in these tubes. The caps are of strong leaves and bark strips which dry hard and tight. Much food with little weight. This is my own idea, which I have taught my people. And here," nodding toward a chewing girl, "is an idea for which I am not responsible and which may not be so pleasant to you."

As he spoke, the girl took from her mouth the yuca root which she had been masticating; placed it carefully in a clay dish holding a small mound which somewhat resembled mashed potato; tossed another chunk of yuca into her mouth, and resumed her jaw-work. The Americans watched her, suspicion and repulsion growing on their faces.

"*Masata!*" guessed McKay. "I've heard of the stuff, but never saw it made. Your people eat *masata?*"

"Truly," answered the Spaniard, with a grin of enjoyment at the evident distaste of the others. "Through all this country *masata* is the favorite food; the yuca root mixed with the saliva of the ladies. The Jiveros all use it; they call it *giamancha*. One puts it in water and drinks it. It is very nourishing: one mouthful of yuca has the strength of four mouthfuls of potato. And there is no other way of preserving the root than by this chewing."

"Ugh! Me, I'd go hungry a long time before touchin' that stuff," asserted Tim.

"Quite likely. It is all a matter of prejudice. My men would not think of starting on a long trail without it. It will be sealed as carefully as the meat, and used as needed. With only these two kinds of food we could march many a long league. And with the things we may pick from the forest, we shall not suffer."

"Especially tapirs," said Knowlton. "Seems to be plenty of those big beasts hereabouts."

"That is one thing for which we can thank our head-hunting friends," smiled José. "It is against their religion to kill the tapir."

The others eyed him quizzically.

"Religion?" scoffed McKay. "Since when have those murderers had religion?"

"It is true," José affirmed. "They believe in a god of rivers and rain, who orders the quick rise and fall of the streams and the coming of showers at good or bad times for their crops. And they believe that his favorite creatures are the tapir, which lives much in the rivers; the *yacumama*—the great water boa—and the frog. He is likely to take the shape of any one of these things himself, if he is in the mood. So the Jiveros are afraid to touch the tapir, the snake, or the frog, because the god might be angered, and then he would cause a great flood which would destroy all the people."

"Hm! And do your people believe this?"

"But no. They are a little afraid of the great devil-snake—and who is not?—but they kill and eat the tapir as gladly as they kill the shrinkers of heads. They eat the frog also. The only superstition my White Ones have is that I myself am at least half a god and can never be overcome. And you may be sure that I do not dispute them."

"Faith, they could believe lots o' worse things," remarked Tim. "I ain't never seen ye licked yet."

"When you do see it you will see me dead," was the simple answer. "You know

what defeat means in this land. Until now I have always won."

A slight shadow passed over his face. He seemed about to say more, but no words came. Abruptly he passed doorward. McKay eyed him cornerwise.

"Until now?" he suggested.

Outside, José paused, sweeping a look around his guarded hills. His lips opened; closed; opened again.

"Until now," he echoed. "Somehow, Rodrigo, I feel uneasy now. I do not know why. Yet it is a feeling which I have seldom known to fail—the feeling which more than once has saved me when I was alone in the forest; that some danger was near. It has been upon me ever since I gave my captains the command to prepare to march, and it grows stronger hour by hour. Something gnaws at me, telling me not to go forth"

Again he looked along the rim of jungled rock, his expression vaguely troubled.

"Never before have I felt so when about to start away," he concluded. "Always I have been sure of victory."

Knowlton cast his gaze around the wall, then laughed.

"You're too much married, old chap," he rallied. "I've seen lots of fellows like you. When they were single they'd grab the devil by the tail and tie a knot in it, but after they got wives they began to grow that worried look that's on your handsome face right now. Forget it!"

He slapped the brooding king on the shoulder. At the tingling impact José straightened, and his somber expression dissolved.

"Perhaps you have it right, *teniente*," he grinned. "I am a man of many burdens. Hah! But, *por Dios*, I still can tie a knot in the tail of the devil! Do not think that José Martinez is so woman-ridden as to skulk from a fight, even if it be his last. *Vamos!*"

And on the way back to the rock he swaggered along with the buccaneering swing which had been his in the days of lone bush-ranging, a price on his head and a dare in his eyes to any man to come and get it.

AT THE main house, which had been their living-quarters ever since their arrival, they found a dozen newly arrived Sumataras, each squatting beside a tight-woven hooded pack-basket. On the approach of the whites, the men arose. One who seemed to be their leader spoke briefly to José, ending by throwing back the lid of his basket. Within it showed sealed tins and a rubber-wrapped bundle. At a word from José, the twelve lifted the rattan containers, carried them into the inner room habitually used as dormitory by the North Americans, and dumped them. The adventurers, who had followed, gazed at their own equipment, which had been cached weeks ago on the bank of the Bobonaza.

"How come?" puzzled Knowlton. "We didn't send for this stuff. How'd they find it?"

"I sent them for it," nonchalantly explained José. "You mentioned that you had left it on a hill one day's journey below Canelos. So I told a *sargento* of my army to go and find it. It was easy for him."

"Hm! And we'd have defied all the Indians in the world to find that cache."

"You do not know my men. Wait until you see them smell out a hidden town of the head-hunters."

To the spokesman of the dozen he monotoned a few words, receiving a single syllable in reply. At another short sentence from him, the strong mouths widened in swift smiles. Then the carriers stalked out.

"They have seen no sign of enemies. I have told them that the enemy shall soon see signs of us. Now I go to see to various matters. Let your load for this march be of cartridges only. All else shall be provided."

And he was gone to look after some new detail of preparation.

Left alone, the seekers of David Rand fell to scanning their cans and tightly closed duffle-bags, plainly marked with waterproof paint or varnished tags. Old campaigners all, they had burdened themselves only with necessities; yet the necessities constituted a sizeable pile. From it they selected as much ammunition as could well be carried; spare gun-cleaning kits; and new footgear—soft, flexible, but tough boots of the high moccasin type. With the addition from their everyday duffle of a light blanket, an extra shirt, a medical packet, and the inevitable tooth-brush, matches and tobacco, each was fully equipped except for food and bed. For these they relied on the White Ones, who possessed trail-hammocks

much lighter than their own stout hanging nets.

When José again looked into the room he found the confusion of spilled equipment transformed into a compact pile in a corner; three small heaps beside the wall; three army pack-carriers, with web belts bulging with cartridges, hanging from pegs; and three rifles, machetes, and holstered pistols under the harnesses. The men who owned these things were ready to go. Splashes and masculine mirth from the bathing-pool at the rear told where they now were.

It was two days later, however, before José and his own men were ready to depart. Far into the night burned the fires, reducing the monkey-meat to its most portable form; and before the early-rising Americans strolled forth to look at the new day the smoke-mist was already stealing abroad again. Meanwhile every available man made his travel-preparations or worked at the defenses of the place; for José was leaving behind him only a skeleton garrison, and from three out of the five entrances and their trails he took every watchman. Each of these deserted passages was blocked, however, as effectively as if guarded by the usual custodians; into the cañons were hurled thorn-trees, forming masses whose wicked spikes would repel all creatures except those endowed with wings. For months to come—until the slowly drying trees could be cleared away by fire—those passages would be useless to the White Ones as well as to any invaders. But José was determined to leave no approach unguarded during his absence.

The other two trails and portals, with their guardians, were left unchanged. So was the guard on the central rock. And to the women and the boys was left a supply of aboriginal arms, in the use of which they were well versed.

Then, on the third morning, the army moved. Bare-foot, bare-armed, with machete pendent at his belt, bullet-pouch slung under one arm, and rifle in his fist, José strode across the upper ground and, without a parting word or look for his family, swung down the cliff path. Behind him, packs rolled snugly at their backs and guns across their shoulders, marched McKay and Knowlton and Tim. And at Tim's heels, her level eyes questing the distances, came Nuné; once more garbed in her simple robe, which she would doff as soon as she had passed through the gateway, to become again a girl of the forest.

Out along the woods path they filed, finding every byway crammed with armed men bearing basket-packs. These, headed by their subordinate officers, fell in behind. Rod by rod the line lengthened as each side alley debouched its detachment. When it had passed, the by-paths held only women and children who had come to watch the going of the expedition. No farewells were spoken; no man looked back; no call or cry came from wife or daughter. Stoically each woman stood and looked her last on the mate who might never return; then withdrew to her home, to wait through long weeks.

At the top of the stiff climb into the cañon of exit, Tim glanced back and down. As far as he could see along the path, men were coming in a steady file which seemed endless. Meanwhile McKay, always looking forward, saw that now José was preceded by Indians who evidently had waited in the ravine. These, he surmised, formed the vanguard, under either Aillu or Curac; and scouts probably were half a mile or more in advance.

Into the rocky cleft they swung, and on through it, and down the winding track beyond. The following line, enviously watched from above by the guards doomed to remain at home, poured after them in a living stream. At length the walls ceased to whisper with the slither of marching feet. Empty and silent yawned the rift, devoid of life except for the human hawks stationed at its brink. The army had vanished into the vast green sea of trees beyond.

The guards grunted sourly and turned to their duties. Their keen eyes ranged back and forth, sweeping the accustomed vista within and without their wall. They missed nothing; nothing, that is, which lay within mortal ken. Yet there was one thing, grim and sinister, which even their trained sight did not perceive. That was the lurking fantom which still reared its head invisible against the sky; which grinned and gibbered soundlessly as it watched the long line go crawling away through the jungle—and which then leered down more maliciously than ever at the women and children left behind.

TO BE CONTINUED

The King of No Man's Land

A Four-Part Story. Part III

By Arthur O. Friel

Author of "Thicker Than Water," "The Thirty Gang," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

BACK to back, three white men—McKay, Knowlton, and Ryan—fought doggedly against foes half seen. They had poor targets—a glimmer of steel; an arrow streaking from a clump of broad-leaved plantain; a dodging movement among a tangle of lianas.

It was an uneven fight, and when fierce yells announced the arrival of another party of savages it seemed that the white men were doomed. And then the firing in the jungle diminished. From near at hand came sudden splashes, earthy thumps, grunts and snarls of grappling antagonists.

Running feet padded and the jungle erupted a figure as grisly as a buccaneer of the Spanish Main. Indians all armed with spear and rifle, smeared with the blood of foemen, hard-jawed and slit-eyed, followed close behind him.

"It is José Martinez!" cried Knowlton.

"It is true," yelled José, his teeth flashing. "Welcome back, my companions of days gone by. What a killing you have made here!"

"Yeah! And now ye come hornin' in and busting up the game!" snorted Tim.

"Then you shall join mine," retorted José. "But come, I must move."

A little later, after much bloody fighting, the four white men sat in the big hut of the conquered Jivero community, scowling at the roof-pole from which hung a score of human heads.

"We're looking for Rand," McKay said presently.

"Rand!" exclaimed José. "Your friend and mine. I have not forgotten. It was he who first brought you three into this part of the world. He disappeared while traveling in Brazil and you found him alive, but crazed by a bullet, among the cannibals of the Rio Javary, in Brazil. And you cured his craziness by hitting him over the head with a gun."

Knowlton nodded.

"He's disappeared again—we're afraid he's gone back to the jungle."

One of José's men brought in one of the women captives. She was not a Jivero woman but a prisoner brought from the country of the Huambizas, away to the southeast. She spoke Spanish perfectly and—was very beautiful. Around her neck a gold cross was suspended. Her name, she said, was Nuné.

She refused to answer José's searching questions but the next morning, proving that she was not ill-disposed toward them, Nuné saved their lives by warning them not to eat the food prepared by the captured Jivero women—it had been poisoned.

By noon the party started back for José's stronghold. Five suns slid across the great green abyss and vanished behind the colossal wall of the Andes. Five nights whelmed the forest in blackness through which moved only the creatures spawned to prey in gloom.

On the sixth day they came to the wonderful domain José had made his own. A stronghold which was practically impregnable; a fertile, sunlit plateau peopled by healthy, intelligent people who called José "king."

"On the level now," said Tim Ryan after José had explained his system of government and his ambition to make his White Ones so powerful that they could exterminate the murderous head-hunters of the jungle; "On the level now: Don't this king business make ye feel sort of tied down?"

"I ache for the voices and laughter of my own people," José said sorrowfully. "I am a white man. I am not an Indian. Yet among the Indians I must live; in the jungles I must die." He laughed harshly.

"The King of No Man's Land," copyright, 1924, by Arthur O. Friel.

"King? *Si*, I have made myself a king and built for myself a prison."

LATER Nuné told the men the story of her life; of how she had been stolen from her home by the Huambizas; of how a Spanish priest had instructed her and of how, when he had been killed by the savages, she had gone from settlement to settlement, unafraid, her only protection the gold cross given to her by the priest.

Further: she admitted that she loved a white man.

"He is," she said, "a leader of the Huambizas. He owns a gun and is a strong fighter. But he kills only men and will not shrink a head or carry off a woman. His eyes are green. In his hair is a white mark over the left ear. He is called Rana."

"Cripes!" muttered the Irishman. "It's him—Dave Rand!"

There was no doubt about it and, although the three friends were happy in the belief that their search was nearing an end, José was greatly disturbed. The Huambizas were his greatest enemies and, led by Rand, would be doubly powerful and menacing to the peace of his people.

"Rand must be made to see reason," he said, "otherwise he will be killed."

"Who by?" demanded Tim.

"If necessary—by me. Any man who joins the enemies of my people becomes my enemy. And a white man who joins the head-hunters is no more a white man. Before Rand are only two ends: Capture or death!"

Hard on the discussion which followed came Lieutenant Montez, an agent of the Peruvian Government.

Montez offered José complete pardon for the crimes which had sent him into exile, reinstatement and high honors on condition that he helped Peru checkmate Ecuador's plan to sieze the region east of the Andes and north of the Amazon.

It was a tempting offer but José's answer was:

"Say to your commander that I am king in my own land; that I will fight—not as a servant of Peru, but as king of a new nation; that I will remain king of my people and king of myself to the end."

Indignant, swearing to make the Huambizas his allies, Montez was escorted to the borders of José's kingdom by chosen warriors.

And then José hurriedly prepared to make war on the Huambizas, realizing that the existence of his people depended on its successful outcome.

The day of departure arrived. The guards doomed to remain at home watched the living stream of José's warriors, headed by their king, Nuné and his three white friends, pour through the rocky gorge and into the wandering track; watched until the army vanished into the vast green sea of trees beyond.

CHAPTER XV

THE KING JESTS

FOR two days the expedition of the White Ones crawled on with the smooth speed of a great serpent. It twisted and wound, sliding downward, ever downward, along dim trails which writhed in curves and bends through the shadowy labyrinth. It started at the first light which would reveal the course to the expert eyes of the scouts; it halted to eat swiftly and sparingly about midday; it stopped again only when night approached. Then it drew its steel and attacked the forest, severing poles, shearing great plantain-leaves, clipping and splitting bush-ropes, and transforming them into shelters beneath which it might sleep undisturbed by rain.

In the deepening darkness bloomed many small fires, and with the pungent smoke blended the odor of broiling meat; for, though there was little time for hunting, more or less game was knocked over each day by the scouts up ahead, who allowed no movement below or aloft to escape their quick eyes and who planted an arrow in any luckless turkey or animal within easy range. They did not attempt to carry this game after killing it; they laid it beside the trail and passed on, leaving it to be picked up and transported by men behind. At night they coolly demanded—and received—from those men the choicest meats they had furnished that day.

Through the night all slept peacefully, with fires smouldering to thin the mosquitoes and to taunt any prowling *tigres* which might snarl hungrily in the surrounding bush. Serenely conscious of the facts that they still were in their own land and were too strong to be assailed by man or beast, they gave scant heed to the night noises. Least concerned of all was Nuné; and well she might be. After facing the prospect of making her way alone through the wilderness, she now found herself sleeping in the royal hut and protected from all danger by four very capable white men, while all about her rested scores of other formidable fighters.

"It is not as you feared it would be, is it, girl?" José twitted at the first night's camp. "Instead of walking alone, you have more men than any woman of this land ever had before. Every Huambiza woman will envy you when you tell the tale."

"Nuné did not fear," she denied. "Piatzo cares for his servant. Yet you are good men, and it is pleasant to walk with you."

"We are glad." The Spaniard made a mock bow. "Since we are such good men, your Piatzo should command you to tell us of the quickest way to reach Rana."

A single head-shake betokened her rejection of this argument.

"You go to make war on my people," she asserted. "If it be the will of Piatzo that you succeeed, he will lead you. He does not tell me to speak."

"Your Piatzo is a fraud, and you are another," José rejoined good-humoredly. "We shall find what we seek without the aid of any Piatzo. We shall follow the lead of Chaquicuna."

A surprized look flitted over her face, but she said no more.

"Who's he? One o' the scouts?" wondered Tim.

"Chaquicuna? No. He is the other god of the Jiveros—the god of the forest, as Yacumama is the god of the waters. One of his feet is that of a man, the other that of a *tigre*. Quite likely we shall see his tracks near this camp in the morning. If we do I shall show them to her—and you shall see how strong is her faith in Piatzo."

Knowlton and McKay, sprawling in their new hammocks, squinted at him through their cigaret-smoke.

"One man foot and one tiger foot?" puzzled Knowlton. "You're joking."

"No. It is true. Have you never seen such tracks?"

"M-m-m. Seems as if I have. Let's see. Oh, sure. I get it. A man walks along, and a jaguar or a puma follows his track in the mud. Then the next man to come along sees man-tracks and cat-tracks together. And those fools believe it's done by a god?"

"Truly, *teniente*. Their wizards tell them so, and they believe it. And this girl, for all her prating about Piatzo, learned of the Jivero gods when she was small and still believes in them. You shall see."

"Just how do you expect to find Dave without her help?" queried McKay.

"That, also, you shall see," was the smiling answer.

And José curled up and went to sleep.

If he heard the coughs of near-by jaguars in the night he gave no sign of it. But immediately on awaking in the morning he slipped out of the hut and into the bush as if he knew where to go. Soon he was back, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Chaquicuna favors our march," he said solemnly in Spanish. "He was with us in the dark hours, and I have just seen his tracks in the forest. He goes before us. Nuné, you do not believe that the god of the forest leads us against the Huambizas? Then come and see with your own eyes."

Without awaiting reply, he led the way. She followed. The Americans, after a moment of indecision, remained where they were. While José was out they had freshened a fire and boiled coffee, and now the aroma of the hot liquid was more tempting than the inspection of marks in the mud. Squatting about the little blaze, they sipped and smoked and banished the dank night chill from their bones.

Presently the pair returned: the girl lithe and fair, the man swarthy and satirical; such a contrast that Tim, watching them approach, muttered:

"Cripes! They look like an angel and the devil!"

The sober face of the angel, and the sly wink of the devil, showed that she had indeed looked on a set of tracks which had aroused her early superstitions. She seemed somewhat disturbed, and her gaze swept about the encompassing woods as if she almost expected to see a weird figure moving somewhere in the shadows. Reaching the hut, she went about the preparation of the frugal breakfast in an absent fashion. José squatted by the fire and accepted a cupful of coffee.

"The god left a fine track," he chuckled. "One of my men probably wandered a little after making camp, and a cat sniffed along his trail in the night. I am glad we have the girl with us; there are few jokes on a war-trail, and I can tease her all the way to her own land. But perhaps that will arouse the anger of Señor Tim. Hah?"

"She ain't my girl no more," grumbled Tim. "And kiddin' don't hurt her none. Leastways, mine didn't: I thought I was gittin' in good and then she gimme the razz, same as they all do. It's a tough world for a soft-hearted li'l feller like me. But what's yer big idea in knockin' her religion? That don't git us nothin'."

"I know it. I only wanted to prove to myself that her faith in Piatzo was not so strong as to overcome her Huambiza beliefs. She is Huambiza at heart, and when we enter Huambiza country she must be carefully watched. It is not my plan to let her escape and give warning that we come."

WITH that he began eating. The others, though saying nothing, looked at the girl with more sympathy than he had shown. In a way, her life was pathetic. Captured in infancy and grown to womanhood among savages, still she possessed the superior mind of her white ancestry. And that mind, hemmed in by the soul-crushing jungle, was eternally groping for higher things. The crazed priest who saved her had been a nobler being than the greatest man of her tribe—the wizard whom she had spurned even in horrid extremity—and to his twisted but forceful intellect she had instinctively attached herself.

In the queer, hopeless rôle of priestess which he had laid upon her, she had traveled the haunts of savagery until revulsion drove her to Macas—there to be jeered at by the rabble and returned to the jungle by the clergy. And then to the masterful mentality of the pseudo-Indian Rana she had "turned her heart"; and her heart still was with Rana, despite any brief coquetry with Tim. Reaching, blindly reaching toward the light, like a flower striving to rear itself above snake-breeding muck—such was the pitiful urge of the soul of Nuné.

In her present struggle between crude superstition and higher teachings these hardened adventurers from the North saw no joke. For once, the cynical humor of the Spaniard jarred.

"If it's all the same to you, José," Knowlton said coolly, "I wouldn't josh her any more about her gods."

"What! Ha, ha, ha! *Por Dios,* is our gold-haired *teniente* now the victim of the soft brown eyes?"

The blond man flushed. His mouth tightened, and a glint came under his silky lashes.

"No. But she's a good kid. And her beliefs are none of our —— business. Get me?"

José peered at him. For an instant a hot spark glowed under his own brows. Then it vanished, and he chuckled in a good-humored way.

"As you will, comrade. I have seen men fight to the death because they did not agree about some idiotic quibble of religion, and I hope we are not such fools."

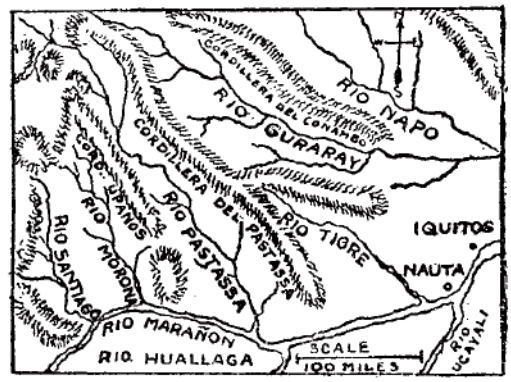
"I don't care about her religion. But there's no sense in plaguing her."

"True enough," José agreed equably. "There is none. So let us say no more about it."

And no more was said.

Soon they were again on the march, swinging along at the steady, unhurried gait which ate up distance without apparent fatigue to the Indians or to José, but which the Americans found a bit stiff to maintain. At the end of that day's traverse Tim gazed ruefully at a heel-blister formed by his new foot-gear, and all three welcomed the news that the next day they should ride. They had nearly reached a certain creek at which, José informed them, he had ordered a concentration of canoes.

"For the next few days," he added, "we shall travel in very close quarters, for every



canoe must carry all the men it can. So, Señores Tim and Knowlton, decide between you which shall be the one to sit close to our little friend here."

He squinted impishly at Nuné, then at the pair he had addressed. Knowlton laughed with his usual good nature.

"Put her next to Rod," he advised. "He's absolutely woman-proof. Didn't mean to pick a fuss this morning, José. I flare up too quickly sometimes."

"No fuss was picked, *amigo.* I understand you quite well, and why you spoke. Yet is it not queer how a woman can cause words between men without even knowing she does so? I shall be truly glad when she is once more free in her own land."

"Ye're dead right," agreed Tim. "This li'l lady, she's all to the mustard and game as they make 'em, and I like her fine, even if she did slip me the frosty mitt. And yet, somehow, I got a hunch we're goin' to git into a peck o' trouble about her. I dunno why; I jest feel that way. I wisht she was back home, like Hozy says, and we didn't

have no woman to think about. This here Warm Beezer parade we're takin' had oughter be a stag party."

Three slight nods concurred.

"But o' course we got to treat her right and see her home safe, even if we do knock her folks for a gool right afterwards. Gee, and then what's goin' to happen to her? We go in there and blow her whole outfit off the map and yank Dave out and pack him off, and leave her all out o' luck. Dang it, we can't fix things right for her, no matter what we do."

"She must do as all other women of this land do—live whatever life and die whatever death her gods provide for her," José declared, with a careless shrug. "Perhaps to become the mate of some head-hunter and forget Señor Dave, perhaps to drink the barbasco—*quién sabe?*"

"Barbasco? What's that?" asked Knowlton.

"It is the vine which the Jiveros use for fishing. They crush it and throw it into slow water, and the milky juice from it kills the fish. In Brazil it is called *'timbo.'* The women captured in raids by the Jiveros sometimes use it to kill themselves."

A sudden silence fell. The Americans stared thoughtfully at their cigarets. To each came the thought that the deadly barbasco probably had furnished the one way out for the frantic mother of Nuné, a victim and slave of the barbarians. Whether or not that was true, it was more than likely that Nuné herself, when bereft of the man of her choice and abandoned forever to a hopeless existence in the shadows, would resort to the vine. To her despairing mind this impulse would, no doubt, seem the bidding of Piatzo. She who had braved the malignity of the wizard of Kwana would not shrink from the brief agony which would open the gates to oblivion.

One by one they snapped their cigaret-butts outside, drew their blankets across their chests, and lay motionless. Around them sounded only the subdued hiss of smouldering fires and the brief grunts of resting Indians. Farther out rose and fell the low, mournful notes of *pauji* turkeys murmuring in the thin light filtering down from a small moon; the soft call of a *tuta-cuchillo* night monkey traveling the high branches; the weird plaint of a lonely sloth; the whistle of a tapir summoning his mate.

And in her hammock, at the end of the row of five slung within the hut, the girl of whom these men were thinking lay without a thought for any of them. That tapir-call was in her ears, and a deeper call in her heart; and her half-closed eyes looked steadfastly toward the west, as if through the limitless leagues of jungle she saw something dearer to her than the symbolic cross nestling in her bosom.

And out of the west, unknown to her or to those around her, her fate was advancing with swift, inexorable strides.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SEED OF DISTRUST

DOWN a narrow but deep creek, which crawled black and slow through the mud of the lowland jungle, slid a long line of dugout canoes. The human serpent which recently had been slithering along the trails now had become a great water-snake.

As the commander-in-chief had foretold, every boat was crammed with men, riding so low that the gunwales were almost awash. At the head of the line glided the scar-faced Curac, acknowledged *capitán* of operations on the Pastasa side of the cordillera of the White Ones. The two canoes immediately behind carried José, McKay and Nuné as watchful idlers in the one, and Knowlton and Tim in the other. The very last boat in the wriggly file brought Aillu, guarding against any chance of straggling.

Except for the many slight sipping sounds of paddles entering and leaving the water the column journeyed in utter silence. Now and then, from far above, where the sunlight blazed, sounded the raucous cries of macaws, deadened by height and intervening foliage. Whatever life moved nearer at hand made no noise. To the eyes of the voyagers no life was visible except an occasional venomous snake in the black mud at the shores.

Abruptly a grunt broke from Curac. He rose to his knees, his carbine swinging to his shoulder. From the paddles of his canoemen sounded a seething growl of water suddenly opposed; the boat checked as they reversed their strokes. Instantly a prolonged splash filled the air just ahead. A big, dark log which had been lying partly out of the water hurled itself down-stream, moving so fast that the startled eyes of the

Americans caught only a white surge which subsided into turbulent waves. The log was a great anaconda.

"——!" swore José vehemently. "That beast made me jump. I am glad he moved before we were above him." Then his quick grin crinkled under his mustache, and he added: "Nuné, you see that we travel with the favor of both the gods. That was Yacumama, and he did not hurt us. He has gone before us to crush our enemies."

She made no answer, but the troubled look came again into her face. As their paddlers resumed the usual speed José chuckled repeatedly over his joke. Whether the others liked it or not, this chance to tease the girl had been too good to lose. Had he looked again at her, he would have found her staring soberly at her gold cross. But he gave her no further attention.

Cruising onward, they saw nothing more of the great snake. It had vanished into the mud.

For all the quietness of their movement, they were traveling at the best possible speed. No tree-trunks blocked them, although plenty of fallen giants slanted across the steep banks above their heads. They had embarked about mid-forenoon, and no pause was made for eating. Each paddler, as he grew hungry, stopped work long enough to gobble a few mouthfuls of meat-paste and *masata*, then swung on again. At no time did any boat slacken its pace.

Hour after hour they journeyed on. At length the scattered sun-splotches began to strike into their eyes whenever McKay's compass showed the veering lane to run westward. Presently the scout-boat slowed. Curac arose and held up a hand. A series of grunts ran back from boat to boat, and paddling ceased. Curac's dugout slipped forward, heading into an apparent blockade of brush. It wormed out of sight and was gone.

Soon it reappeared. Curac spoke briefly, with no attempt at muffling his tones. The line surged forward again. Along a bush-choked passage it squirmed—and out into open water where the sun struck with dazzling brilliancy. An invisible hand grasped the canoes and swept them fast to the southward. They were in a hurrying river, flanked on both shores by the ever-present tropical timber.

"Once more we are at the Pastasa," announced José. "Now we shall make speed."

And make speed they did, for perhaps another hour. The water, though swift with the current scooting down from the distant Andes, was smooth, and the over-crowded craft suffered no mishap. As the grilling sun approached the lofty crest of the tree-line, José called to Curac, who pointed a little ahead. Within ten minutes his dugout swerved shoreward, swung into a narrow opening, and was gone. The others, following, found themselves entering a spacious lagoon, sandy-shored and concealed from the river by a narrow but dense tree-fringe. Soon the entire flotilla was inside the bottle-necked bay and debarking on the shelving sands.

"So ends this day," yawned José, stretching himself like a lean cat.

He surveyed the landing activities of his warriors, cocked an eye at the sky, and nodded. The canoes, having disgorged their men, were being moored at a little distance out, their long ropes lying loosely in order to allow for any quick rise or fall of the water caused by cloud-bursts in the distant mountains. The men not engaged in this anchoring were bringing arm-loads of long plantain-leaves from the bush and shoving their stalks into the sand, forming frail but dew-proof hoods. Weatherwise as the animals of their native woods, they foresaw that this would be a rainless night, and so were bedding on the sun-dried ground. As a matter of course, they built shelters also for their king and his companions—three of them, at the spot where the whites had landed.

The ex-soldiers, watching the rapid construction of the leaf-tents and observing the size of each, smiled reminiscently.

"Looks like a real army camp this time," commented Knowlton. "Pup-tents, with room for two buddies in each. Do your men sleep double as a regular thing?"

"Yes, when sleeping on the ground. It is for warmth. They have no covering, you know, and the ground grows cold before sunrise. Now let us bathe before the sun goes under. Curac!"

To the chieftain he gave directions, meanwhile sharply scanning the surface. No crocodiles were in sight. Warriors, obeying Curac, waded in with spears. Several of them stabbed at spots on the bottom, then lifted their lances. Impaled on the points, hideous flat creatures lashed whip-like tails:

sting-rays, furiously struggling to drive their gangrenous tail-barbs into the hard-wood shafts. The disgusting things were hurled ashore, where machete-men cut them to pieces.

When the water was declared safe, the five plunged in; the men garbed only in breeches, the girl in her short *tanga*. A quick swim—with eyes ever open for some vindictive denizen of tropic waters which might have been overlooked—and they emerged refreshed. The last fierce rays of the sinking sun dried their wet garments in a trice.

Then the warriors took their dip and were out again. In the twilight were born the night fires, and to that of José came men bearing good-sized fish which they had expertly speared farther down the lagoon. While these delicacies were cooking, the Americans glanced again down the long line of shelters, before which the slim lances stood erect like deadly sprouts from the erstwhile empty sand. They contemplated the little fires spotting the half-gloom, the squatting or moving figures of fighters, the fleet of canoes resting on the water like uncouth river-beasts patiently awaiting the next day's move.

"Yeah, this here sure feels like the real thing, I'll tell the world," approved Tim. "A reg'lar gang o' he-gorillas, campin' like doughboys, not hangin' up in hammicks like navy gobs. Come on, looey, le's go inspect quarters: see how these guys have got things laid out. No? Ye're gittin' fat and lazy. Aw wal, here's Noony, all dressed up—got her nightie on and everything. I'd rather walk with her anyways. Come on, Noony—*vamos—anda conmigo*—looka da *soldados*—you know. Savvy?"

But Nuné laughed at him and sank gracefully beside José, awaiting her share of the savory fish. Tim snorted, reddened, and sauntered away alone, pursued by the derisive laughter of José. When the meal was ready he had vanished somewhere among the huts, and a messenger sent to find him returned with the information that he was eating with a *sargento* and several other warriors.

IN THE thin light of the young moon, Aillu strode soft-footed to the royal fire and squatted awhile with Curac and José, conferring about future plans. When the pair arose and departed they were grinning. José, catching the inquiring gaze of the Americans, returned it as if weighing something in his mind. After a moment he glanced about in search of Tim. Finding him still gone, he laughed shortly and arose.

"Our friend Tim grows restless," he commented. "Soon we may show him something of interest. *Buenos noches.*"

He stepped toward the shelter which he and McKay were to share between them.

"What's up?" called Knowlton.

José gave no sign of having heard. Reaching his leaf-tent, he squatted, frogged his way inside, and was still. Knowlton frowned.

"I don't like that," he muttered. "He heard."

McKay nodded, glancing cornerwise at him. Both smoked a minute; finished their cigarets; shoved the coals into the sand.

"Look here, Rod," Knowlton went on, speaking low. "I'm wondering. Does it strike you that things aren't quite so open and above-board as they might be?"

"You mean——"

McKay moved his head toward José.

"Uh-huh."

"How so?"

"Well, we're sort of trailing along in the dark — taking our friend yonder on faith. He hasn't let us in on his plans since we started. I always like to have a look at what I'm going to do before I do it. You understand."

Another nod, and a silent pause.

"And another thing," Knowlton went on, as if thinking aloud. "We're here to get Dave—safe. Friend J. is out to get Dave—safe or otherwise. His main idea is to smash Dave's outfit. We three come in very handily as smashers. That's all right—as long as we don't slip into the position of subordinates and allow ourselves to be used as such. When a fellow begins to assume that I'll trail along with my eyes shut I begin to smell around a little, no matter who he is."

Once more McKay nodded, digging a thumb absently into the sand. Their value as gun-fighters was self-evident. So was the fact that the José of today was a man accustomed to commanding the services of others and to subordinating every other consideration to the development of his little kingdom. These worldly-wise veterans were no strangers to the changes

wrought in men by accession to power or by dominating ambition; they had witnessed such transformations—most of them for the worse. And it was unpleasantly obvious that Aillu and Curac, who were Indians and subordinates, had just been given some information cavalierly withheld from themselves, who were white men and presumably peers of José.

"Doesn't look good," agreed McKay. "But we'll see. Meanwhile, guess I'll turn in. Going to wait up for Tim?"

"Not I. Let him sleep with the Indians if he likes. 'Night."

Knowlton was still awake, however, when Tim came creeping into the shelter. Feigning sleep, he covertly studied the other's face in the moonlight now slanting in at the open end of the hood. Tim's nose seemed swollen, and he breathed with some difficulty. Lying down, he fingered the injured member tenderly.

"Serves you right!" Knowlton erupted. "Whose tent did you try to get into, you night-walker?"

"Huh? Aw say, d'ye think I dunno me way home? I jest been wrastlin' with one o' the boys."

"Meaning what?"

"Meanin' jest that. Been hangin' round with some hard guys down yonder—one of 'em could talk a li'l bum Spinach, and between that and makin' signs we got along fine. Had a great ol' parley-voo about nothin' much. Then we got foolin' round, and I thought it'd be a good joke to pull a few wrastlin' holds on 'em. But these guys ain't got no sense o' humor. The gink I had a holt of, he butted me in the nose so hard he knocked me for a row o' bananas, and before I could git up he dang near unjointed me. Ye know me, looey—I've handled some tough eggs before now. But I don't want no more o' that guy's stuff. Course, I had to go easy and laff like 'twas all a joke—'twas either laff or kill him, and that wouldn't do. But I tell ye these here gorillas are hard, looey, the hardest nuts I ever seen. I'm goin' to lay off 'em."

"You'd better! You wild Irishman, they're killers, every one of 'em. You're lucky that you got out of it without a broken neck."

"Faith, I believe ye. But don't tell Hozy. Them bright jokes o' his are gittin' sour on me stummick, and if he started kiddin' me about this here nose o' mine I'd likely slip me temper and paste him one. Then we'd be in the soup for fair."

"You bet we would. Well, forget it and pound your ear. I'll keep it dark."

Tim speedily went to sleep. But Knowlton lay a little longer awake, frowning at the leaves above. Tim, too, was becoming a bit uncordial toward José. His distaste for the Spaniard's jokes might grow into downright dislike; and when Tim disliked any man he was never at pains to disguise his sentiments. Tiny seeds of discord were beginning to sprout, and Knowlton knew from previous experience that the tempers of fighting men form fertile soil for the rapid growth of such seeds.

"Things aren't so good," he thought. "If this sort of thing keeps on developing the lid may blow off sudden and hard, and somebody'll get hurt. Wish I'd kept my mouth shut to Rod tonight. Well, I'll keep it shut hereafter unless there's mighty good cause to open it. And I'll try to sit on the lid awhile and see if I can hold it down."

So, when José stared at Tim's bulging nose in the morning and Tim's jaw began to protrude, Knowlton casually said:

"That nose ought to be on me, and a couple of shiners to boot. I dreamed last night that a Jivero was at me, and before I knew where I was I'd smashed Tim in the face. Guess I'm getting nervous."

"——! Señor Tim, you must tie his hands tonight!" snickered José. "He has been eating too much monkey-meat, yes? We shall feed him on fish for a time."

Tim grunted something, and the incident passed. They were soon on the move, and if José ever learned the truth about the Irishman's mishap he said nothing. Later, in their canoe, Tim muttered:

"Thanks, looey. I woke up with a grouch, and I'd sure have started a war if ye hadn't carried the hod like that."

"Enough said. Swallow your grouches hereafter."

Down the river they swept, pestered more and more by mosquitoes as the sun rolled higher and the water grew more muddy. The Pastasa was widening, the current losing the force with which it had leaped down its long cañon from the far-off falls of Agoyan. Now the voyagers were in the real mud country where insect pests bred by the millions, and it was with vast relief that they turned, at mid-afternoon, into a shadowy stream issuing from the

western bank. There the plague of the little stinging demons lost much of its virulence.

Perhaps an hour later, the canoes halted for another night. Again camp was made in the thick bush, and Tim once more found himself forced to hang in a hammock. Except for an increase of vigilance and a more wary silence, the White Ones showed no indication of such caution as might be expected on entering enemy country. Unlike the comparatively small party with which the adventurers had first traveled, they kept the night fires burning, secure in the belief that no foe strong enough to attack them was near.

"What's the name of this stream, José?" queried Knowlton. "Or has it any name?"

"*Sí*. This is the Yana Yacu."

As on the previous evening, the Spaniard looked at the Americans and seemed to debate something with himself, then decide against it. At the sound of the name, Tim had suddenly become alert, and his eyes bored into the other's face. José said no more, and presently he walked away. The red man's mouth set in a hard line.

"Hey, listen here, fellers!" he rumbled. "Hozy ain't playin' square. He's holdin' out on us."

"Meaning?" demanded McKay.

"Meanin' he don't come clean. Meanin' I've got the low-down about this here, now, Yarny Yakoo place. Got it last night before that buttin' goat knocked it out o' me head. That big chief with the ugly mug—the one Hozy calls I-you—come along and give the bush-sergeant a tip, and when he was gone I worked it out o' the sarge. Up here on this Yarny Yakoo there's a gang o' head-hunters, and we're goin' to mop 'em up!

"Did he tip you guys off to that?"

"No," admitted McKay.

"Uh-huh. Wal, what's the idea? Looks to me like he don't trust us or somethin'. If he don't trust us, I sure don't trust him! And I mind he said he'd kill Dave if necessary. And he said Noony could take that there barbasco poison for all he cared, or somethin' like that. He don't care what comes of anybody but his own gang. As long's he wins out, Dave and Noony can go to —— and so can Ryan and McKay and Knowlton! I'm off him!"

His mates glanced at each other, frowning, as their own brief talk of the previous night leaped into their minds.

"Sure you didn't misunderstand that Indian?" clipped McKay.

"Dead sure!"

"All right. Keep mum." The captain's tone hardened. "We'll be dummies just a little longer—and see what happens."

CHAPTER XVII

THE FRUIT OF DISCORD

IT WAS about noon on the second day thereafter when the scout-boat of Curac suddenly slowed, then stopped. Its bow-paddler had picked something from the water, and Curac was examining it. As the canoe of José slid alongside, the chief mutely held out the find to his commander.

It was nothing but a chip, hacked from some tree by a dull machete or stone ax. Yet it was indisputable evidence of the presence of men somewhere beyond. José nodded, and the leading boat resumed its way. But now it traveled with redoubled stealth, and the attitudes of its paddlers betrayed tense watching of everything ahead.

Before long another sign was spied and seized. This time it was a two-inch, convex flake of charred wood. To the eyes of McKay, who glanced at it, it told no story except that it had been in fire. But to Curac it was no mere débris from a camp-fire, but a fragment gouged from an embryo canoe in process of construction by flame and ax. This obviously betokened the existence of a settlement.

The Yana Yacu here was hardly a stone's throw in width, though deep enough to afford unhampered progress. Yet Curac, instead of pressing on up the river to find the town, began keenly watching along the shores as if seeking some subsidiary stream. Slowly the tangle on either side slid past, and with inaudible strokes the paddles rose and fell. Then a soft grunt floated back from the scarred veteran, and his bow nosed into an opening at the right.

José, without looking backward, raised an arm high overhead and held it rigid a moment. The signal passed back from canoe to canoe until every crew along the winding waterway was warned. Meanwhile the king's boat glided past the mouth of the tributary, grounding at the shore a little above. The craft of Curac, moving

with utter silence, was proceeding up the new stream.

In steady succession the crowded canoes behind crept up and berthed above that of José, disgorging their crews into the bush. Nobody spoke. The only sounds were rustlings among the leaves and the distant yapping of toucans somewhere farther up-stream. At length all were ashore and the canoes secured to snags or bush-stalks. Then José, who had been critically watching, turned to the Americans and calmly spoke.

"I am hungry," he said. "Let us eat some monkey-paste and——"

"Cripes!" snorted Tim. "Eat? How quick do we git into action?"

"I have not said anything about action, have I?"

"No, ye dummy, but we're wise. Let's go!"

José looked keenly at him, then laughed. To Aillu, who now stood beside him, he muttered some command. The chieftain passed into the bush, grunting briefly to the warriors. They coolly got their tubes of meat and *masata* and fell to eating.

"All in good time, friend Tim, all in good time," said José. "The scouts must first smell out the land, and it may take some time. So we had best be patient and eat. And how do you know so much about my purpose here?"

"Never mind. Mebbe I dremp it last night—though I still dunno why ye come here to scrap with Jiveros when we want to git to the Warm Beezers."

"That is what you shall soon learn."

"Yeah? Thanks!"

Tim's tone was sarcastic. He might have said more, but a head-shake by McKay silenced him.

Some time passed. José was taciturn. The others ate and waited. At length a voice began to mumble, and the Americans stared in astonishment at Curac, reporting to his commander. There had been no sound to indicate his coming, and he seemed to have materialized from the air. Aillu, too, was now standing beside José and listening.

After a short conference the pair turned away and were gone in the bush. José, lounging against a tree, carefully dug up a little rubber pouch and began making a cigaret.

"Say!" blurted Knowlton. "When do we fight?"

"Not yet. There is plenty of time. The place is not far. Let my *capitanes* arrange their forces."

"Big place?" asked McKay, moving his head in the supposed direction of the Jivero settlement.

José shrugged noncommittally, struck a match and puffed at his roll of bark and tobacco, regarding the restive trio with a mocking expression.

He smoked the cigaret very deliberately, and not until it was reduced to a tiny stub did he move. Meanwhile the Indians nearest at hand remained squatting, only the slight movements of their carbines or lances betraying the tension of the wait. Those who had landed farther up-stream were out of sight in the thick growth. At last, with the same deliberation, José moved to his canoe.

"*Vamos*," he said.

McKay strode to the dugout, and Knowlton and Tim to theirs. Then McKay checked, glancing at Nuné, who had been an impassive waiter and who now sought to resume her usual place.

"Going to take her into this row?" he asked.

"Why not? Are we not able to defend her? Get in."

Nuné was in place already, and José also. With no further comment, McKay took his own place. The paddlers gave way, and the canoe glided down-stream, then swerved into the tributary where Curac had gone scouting. Curac now had mysteriously disappeared again, and José was heading the line.

The boat proceeded slowly. McKay, narrow-eyed and tight-jawed, peered fixedly ahead. José sat more loosely, though with rifle ready. Nuné remained impassive. In the next canoe, Knowlton and Tim leaned forward, tense and eager. And behind them came other dugouts bristling with weapons.

Bend after bend was rounded, and still no sign of Jiveros was seen. Suddenly every man jumped as if fired upon from the bush. The silence had been shattered by an inferno of noise.

Gun-shots crashed in a sustained roar. A howling chorus of ferocity mingled with a prolonged screech of fear and hate. The uproar came from some point not far ahead, the noise rolling down the tree-arched creek like a wall of water sweeping through a tunnel. And it kept coming.

The canoe of the king leaped ahead under sudden powerful strokes of the paddles. From José snapped a sharp command that cracked like a whip-lash. The paddlers grudgingly fell back into the previous slow stroke.

McKay, usually holding himself in cool control, broke his restraint with a wrathful demand:

"What's the idea? Why don't you get going?"

"Hey, snap into it!" came Tim's growl. "What the ——'s busted up ahead there?"

"You shall see," came José's maddening answer to both. And he held his men to the same crawl.

THE tumult approached, yet diminished. Abruptly it ended. The canoe, rounding another bend, emerged beside a semi-cleared space of rising ground. At the water's edge lay a row of canoes, and a few rods up the shore a pole-palisade rose among the tree-trunks still standing.

Through a gap in the wall suddenly darted three Jiveros, who dashed straight for the empty canoes. Before the Americans could catch an aim at them, gun-shots crackled from above. The Jiveros sprawled headlong and lay still. In the gateway stood other Indians—lighter and leaner Indians—who lowered rifles from their shoulders and turned back into the enclosure. They were White Ones.

For an instant there was silence. The truth flashed over the three Northerners. While José kept them waiting, he had sent Aillu and Curac with a strong force by land to attack and conquer the Jiveros.

Tim exploded.

"——!" he raved. "Of all the dirty, rotten low-down tricks ye ever pulled, Hozy Marteeny, this is the limit! Who in —— d'ye think we are—a bunch o' schoolteachers viewin' the battlefields after the war? We ain't good enough to fight alongside o' yer lousy Injuns, hey? We stay back with the woman, hey? This is one more o' yer smart jokes, hey? It's the last one ye'll pull on me!"

"Tim! Shut up!" barked Knowlton.

Tim, fighting mad, turned on him with a glare and a growl. More hot words sprang to his lips—but died unspoken. Knowlton had once been his superior officer, and in any clash of wills between them the ex-sergeant's old habit of soldierly obedience still reasserted itself. And the former lieutenant now was no longer an easy-going partner—he was once more a stone-faced, steel-eyed, tight-mouthed officer. Under the fierce intensity of his gaze Tim clamped his jaws together and was dumb.

Then Knowlton shot one glance at José. It was as sharp as a rapier—and as cold. The next instant the canoes grounded at the shore.

The three Northerners stepped out. Without a word McKay strode away from José and joined his partners; and without another look at him they advanced up the hill.

For a full half-minute the king of the White Ones stood and stared after them. Though Knowlton had stopped Tim's tongue, it was unmistakably plain that the Irishman's words expressed the feeling of all three of them; plain, too, that they were unitedly marching away from him because they preferred his room to his company. A red wave swept over the Spaniard's leathery cheeks.

"——!" he hissed.

Then, gulping down his sudden rage, he followed them. His Indians, in a compact mass, came at his back.

Through the gap in the wall passed the Northerners, and into a stumpy clearing where stood several peak-roofed huts. Men were moving rapidly about, but there was no more fighting. Here and there a spear or a machete rose and struck downward, ending the life of some wounded Jivero found among the stumps. Herded together at a central hut seemed to be a knot of prisoners. Bodies littered the ground; bodies of chocolate-skinned head-shrinkers, some with weapons beside them, more with none. It was apparent that this affair could hardly be called a fight. Caught by surprize and shot down—the wounded now being ruthlessly slain—the Jiveros were simply massacred.

The Americans knew well that this was the jungle mode of warfare; that it was the favorite method of the head-hunters themselves; and that any mercy to them would be asinine. Yet the sight of unarmed men riddled with bullets was hardly conducive to a restoration of good feeling toward José. At the same time, it blunted the edge of their resentment at having been kept out of the affair. They would have taken little

pleasure in participating in such an attack.

Warriors of the White Ones, their usually impassive faces aglow with battle-lust, grinned wolfishly at them, then passed on in search for survivors. The three marched on to the central hut. There, as they expected, they found a round-up of women, guarded by hard-eyed Sumataras. They found also, however, something totally unexpected—three live Jivero men.

One of the Sumataras—recognized by Tim as the *sargento* with whom he had supped at the Pastasa lagoon—called their attention, by an unintelligible sentence and a gesture, to the male prisoners. He seemed quite proud of the fact that they had been caught alive and unhurt except for bloody bumps on their heads. The Northerners looked blankly at him. When other Jiveros were slain at sight, why should these be spared? And, above all, why should a White One be proud of it?

All three of the captives were bound with bush-cord, and two of them were darting glances about them as if momentarily expecting death. The third—a tall, powerful savage with waist-long hair, a profusion of tooth necklaces, and snaky lines tattooed on chest and arms—glowered at his captors and ground his black filed teeth with rage. At the white men, too, he glared ferocious hate. For a minute or two he stood with malevolent gaze centered on them, defiant in the face of an unknown fate. Then his beady eyes focused beyond them. Into the insolent orbs crept a flicker of fear.

José had come up. His gaze was fixed on the big Jivero, and so baleful was it that the savage flinched. He said nothing. He only stood there, holding the head-hunter's eyes, piercing to the core of his bestial soul, until beads of cold sweat stood out on the brown face and the thick lips twitched nervously.

"Who caught this one?" the Spaniard demanded, without removing his gaze.

"*Yo*," proudly announced the *sargento*, slapping himself on the chest.

"You are a good warrior. I shall remember."

Whereat the *sargento* swelled. To the listening Americans the mystery now was clear. The prisoners lived because José had previously ordered that captives be taken.

The big Jivero suddenly moved his head, twisting it aside to break the contact with the Spaniard's torturing eyes. His fellow-prisoners, after one look, had kept their gaze away from the conqueror. Now José glanced again at them, looked at the women and children, scanned the huts, and gave short commands. All the women were herded away toward the nearest house. The two cowed Jivero men were seized and dragged toward another. The tall savage, prodded by a red-stained spear-point and directed by a harsh growl from the *sargento*, turned and slunk into the central house.

Not once had José looked at the Americans. Nor did he look at them now. Ignoring them as utterly as they had ignored him after landing, he stepped toward the house into which the Jivero and his guards had gone. But just then, from warriors farther out, came a shout which halted him.

"——!" he muttered. "Is it so?"

From a house some distance away, a warrior came running among the stumps, leaping upward now and then to avoid fallen Jiveros. In one hand he held some small object which he repeatedly raised aloft. As he approached he called something.

José stared blankly at the Northerners, all animosity knocked from his mind. To them he spoke:

"So end the ambitions of republics in this land of devils, and so fare the messages of kings. It seems that Peru will wait long for the message it sought from me."

The runner pattered up, stopped, and extended his hand. From it, dangling by black hair uncut for many weeks, hung a freshly cured little human head. So expertly preserved were its features, so life-like was the thin smile into which some diabolical Jivero had formed the mouth, that it seemed again to be leering at the comely wine-pouring girl in the council-hall of the White Ones.

The Peruvian Force of Security of the East would indeed wait a long time—through all eternity—for the reappearance of Lieutenant Manuel Montez.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TEMPTATION OF TIM

"A BOLD, brave fellow," mused José, somberly regarding the little face which now seemed to mock at all human desire. "I will gamble that he took more

than one Jivero into the land of shadows with him. And he shall have a fitting funeral."

To the *sargento* who had captured the big Jivero he gave commands. At once the man went away. José, carrying the head, entered the house. After a glance at one another, the Americans lounged in after him. Nuné, who had come up with the canoe men as a matter of course, followed.

The interior of the place differed little from the customary head-hunter habitation. The usual low bamboo couches and high meat-racks were there; clay pots and jars lay about the dirt floor; and overhead were suspended blow-guns, spears, baskets and ripening bunches of plantains. One of the beds, however, was somewhat more ornate than ordinary, its rails being decorated with feather-work snugly glued down; and on the wall above it hung a magnificent black-jaguar hide and a cluster of shrunken heads. From these indications, as well as its central location, the strangers judged it to be the home of the chief of the tribe; and the powerful savage, they assumed, was the chief himself. This proved, however, to be not quite correct. The chief was dead, and the captive was the wizard of the settlement.

Ringed by menacing foes, he stood with a hang-dog air, awaiting whatever doom might be pronounced on him. To his evident surprize, the Spaniard ordered his bonds removed. Then he was made to squat before the decorated couch, and on that couch José took his seat, the head of Montez still in his hands. On that head the Jivero's black eyes fixed. The house grew as still as a tomb.

In harsh accents, the outlaw king began to talk. His words were incomprehensible to the Americans, and, apparently, to the prisoner. The threat in the rasping tones, however, was unmistakable. When José ceased, another voice commenced. It was that of the ubiquitous Curac, translating into the Jivero tongue the words spoken in Sumatara by his ruler. If anything, his voice was even more rough than that of José; and his face, usually so deceptively good-humored because of his upturned scar, now seemed to wear the grin of a demon. The Jivero again began to sweat.

When Curac had finished, the captive made no answer. Again José talked; again Curac repeated. Still no answer. The beady eyes flickered from side to side as if seeking a chance for a desperate lunge for safety—and finding none. José, leaning forward, aggressively began a third speech.

Apparently the session would last for a considerable time. McKay and Knowlton, keenly watching faces, tried to deduce the nature and purpose of the inquisition. Tim, still rankling, found the meaningless jargon and the brow-beating by José jarring on his temper. He swung on a heel and walked out of the place.

Outside he paused, viewing the surroundings and trying to decide which way to turn his restless feet. The Sumataras now were moving about the clearing and picking up Jiveros, whom they bore to a spot near by and piled in a heap. As Tim watched, a slight sound behind him drew his head around. On his morose face dawned a smile. Nuné had followed him.

She smiled straight back at him, and smiled most winsomely. More than that, she manifested a desire to walk with him. With a slight inclination of the head she indicated an empty house near at hand. He needed no second invitation. In a few minutes they were out of the scorching sun, and also out of sight and hearing of those remaining in the central structure.

There, in the shadows, she speedily made plain the object of her unexpected move.

"Teem," she said, "which is most your friend—Rana, or that man called José?"

"Rana!" The tone was sourly emphatic.

"And those two with you—Rodrigo and the light one—are they true friends to Rana?"

"*Sí!*"

"Is the man José your master? Must you obey him?"

The question probably was not meant to infuriate Tim, but it did.

"Him?" he sputtered in English. "Not in a million years! He's a swell-headed mutt that's so bloated up over bossin' a few Injuns he thinks he can use white men the same way. But he's through! Thinks we're a bunch o' dumbbells. Aw, ye don't understand."

In Spanish he said:

"No. We are free men. He is master of nothing but Indians."

She smiled again, seeming pleased by the obvious anger she had evoked, and stole a little closer to him.

"It is well," she said. "You are strong

men and true friends of Rana. Nuné is a true friend of Rana. That José is not a friend of Rana. He goes to kill Rana and my people who are the friends of Rana. He laughs at you and your friends. He makes monkeys of you three strong men.

"Why do you not leave him? He thinks he is very wise. Yet he does not know where Rana can be found. With his many men he can kill Jiveros who did not see him coming. A woman could do that. But with all his men he can not find Rana. Nuné can find Rana. Nuné would go fast to Rana. Nuné can lead you to him. Why do you not leave this José behind and go with Nuné to your friend?"

The red man's eyes widened.

"*Cómo?* How?"

"It is easy—if you dare. See. The day is old. All will stay here tonight. At the water are many canoes. The moon will shine. Speak quietly to the tall man and the light one. When all sleep, come with Nuné to the water. We go. We go fast. We go long. We go far ahead of these others. Nuné is strong. She will work hard. With four paddles, with your guns, with Nuné to guide and show you the tricks of the forest, we speed to Rana. So you shall find your friend. So you shall make a monkey of the so-wise man José."

For a moment Tim was swept by hot impulses. The alert girl had plucked shrewdly at the most vibrant strings in his make-up. To reach Rand—to "beat Hozy to it" and thus, as Nuné said, to make a monkey of him—that would be a retaliation which appealed irresistibly to his present mood. Too, the lure of romantic adventure, of swift action, of a death-defying dash through head-hunter land with only his two partners and the girl—this struck a resonant chord. And those subtle words—"if you dare"—spoken by a girl whose impelling gaze burned into his and whose seductive will strove to bend him to the fulfillment of her desires! For ages, men with blood far colder than that of Tim Ryan have fallen before those three words spoken in that way.

Yet Tim's was an honest soul, and a belligerently straight-forward one. To sneak away at night, like a deserter, was an idea which did not appeal. To him it smacked of cowardice, of treachery. His way of leaving José, if he should leave, would be to walk off in broad daylight and truculently defy the Spaniard and all his gang to stop him. Cunning and stealth were foreign to his nature, just as they were instinctive to jungle-bred Nuné. Yet Nuné was playing the game fairly enough. She was a captive, seeking only to escape and reach the man of her heart in time to save him; the three Americans would be stalwart defenders for her in a land where she would need them, and they claimed to be friends of Rana; so she was frankly taking advantage of her opportunity.

While Tim wavered, she added:

"To stay with José will do no good. To him Nuné will never show the way. Without the word of Nuné he will fail. When we reach my country——"

She did not finish, but he understood. At the Morona she would escape alone somehow, or die in the attempt. Again he felt the impulse to turn his back on José and fare forward with his own countrymen.

"*Bien.* I will speak to my friends," he promised.

She smiled again.

"It is well. Now let us go back to them. Nuné would hear what is said."

"Do you understand their talk?"

"*Sí.* The man José asks how the head of the white man was taken. Come."

They emerged again into the sun. As they walked back, Tim was thinking hard; but not too hard to affect carelessness for the benefit of any watching eyes. In fact, he yawned as if bored by the whole place, and stopped a couple of times en route as if vainly seeking something of interest. Reaching the house, he and Nuné sauntered inside as casually as they had come out. The "third degree" was still in progress, and nobody gave them any attention.

A change had come over the Jivero. His eyes had become steady, and in growling tones he was talking. José, who seemed to have a little knowledge of the Jivero language, apparently understood some of the talk but not all of it. When the captive was silent Curàc translated. José nodded, looked down thoughtfully at the head of Montez, and carefully laid it aside.

At that moment a warrior of the White Ones walked in, stepped to the side of his king, and muttered several sentences. He was one of those who could speak and understand Spanish quite well, but now he used his own language. When he had done, José sat very still. Presently he voiced one

laconic word. The warrior stepped back and loitered at the doorway.

The face of the king seemed to grow sharp. But he looked neither to right nor to left, and presently he resumed talking to the Jivero. As Curac repeated, the captive stared. His heavy visage began to brighten. He answered quickly—almost eagerly. As the conversation went on, he actually grinned. At length he sprang up, vehemently repeating something, and laughing aloud.

The Spaniard's fierce expression relaxed. He spoke once more, in a warning tone. The Jivero responded earnestly. With a wave of the hand José signified that the session was ended, and the savage turned to the door. Closely guarded, but unbound, he walked out, head in the air and confidence in his strut.

And as he went, Nuné, who understood what had just been said, looked after him with sudden dismay.

WITH his exit, the house was deserted by all except the Spaniard, the Americans, the girl, and the Sumatara who had last come in, and who still lingered at the door. José rose and faced the others, squarely and steadily eyeing each in turn. His harshness was gone, but he was very grave.

"*Señores*," he said formally, "it is time that we reached a better understanding. There has come between us a feeling which must not continue. Perhaps I am at fault. Perhaps not. There are certain things to be said on both sides. Perhaps you would like first to say what is in your minds. I listen."

McKay instantly accepted the opening.

"Quite right," he clipped. "The sooner we settle this thing, the better. We're not satisfied with the way you're handling matters. We've been leaving things in your hands because we used to be partners, and we expected to be on equal footing this time. It seems to be otherwise. You're running things with a high hand and keeping us in the dark. You're virtually assuming the rôle of boss. We've had enough of it.

"We're indebted to you in many ways, and we're duly grateful. But we're not subordinates of yours. We're either your partners in finding Dave, or we're not. If we are, we're going to know your plans from now on. If we're not, we'll cut loose from your outfit and go it alone. That's all."

"Attaboy, cap!" approved Tim. "Jest what I was thinkin', meself."

José bowed slightly, ignoring Tim.

"You have spoken plainly, as is always your way," he said. "And perhaps I am to blame. But do not think I have wished to be boss over you. Perhaps I have grown too much accustomed to directing affairs and have seemed to slight you. Yet until now you have not questioned the wisdom of my actions. You are angered because I fooled you today and made you miss a fight. But you will remember that I too missed that fight and stayed with you. I do not often stay behind my men.

"It was a joke of mine, but there was a reason behind the joke. It was ill-taken, and I am sorry. But it is past. I shall now do what I was intending, before we came here, to do at this time—to make things clear. I only wished to make sure of success in what I intended to do here. Then I would speak.

"You have wondered how I was to reach Señor Dave. I had no man to guide me to him. I came here to get such a guide. I have him. He is that Jivero who has just gone out. He is the wizard of this place, and knows how to reach the Huambizas who have lately been raiding so fiercely. He will lead us. I have promised him his life and freedom if he leads us right; death, if he does not. Since the Huambizas are his enemies, he is more than glad to do it.

"That was my object in attacking this place—to kill all but a few and to pick from those few a guide. I ordered that the wizard be caught if possible, because the wizard among these people is a fighter and goes on the raids, so that he knows all that can be known; also, he has more brains than any one else. It was done as I ordered, and we now have our man. You know as well as I how important it is to have such a man. If I had not played a joke on you and held you back, we should not have him now. Why? Because you could not approach this place so quietly as to avoid giving warning; no white man can; and this wizard would not have been taken alive if not caught by surprize. So my joke was not so childish.

"As for my next plans, they are simple: To continue up the Yana Yacu; cross the divide through a low pass; go down a stream which almost meets the Yana Yacu, but

flows west instead of east; and so reach the Morona. We shall lose no time. So, Señor Tim, it will not be necessary for you and Nuné to steal away tonight."

The concluding words came so unexpectedly that Tim stood petrified. McKay and Knowlton wheeled and stared at him; saw his dazed expression, and turned frowning faces to José.

"What do you mean by that?" snapped McKay.

"Ask Tim. Señor Tim, there are always two sides to a hut—the inside and the outside. What is said inside can be heard by good ears outside, unless spoken very low."

Then Tim understood. He reddened furiously.

"So ye sicked a spy on us, hey? This here guy in the door that come and spilled the beans in yer ear jest now was listenin' over yonder, hey? Wal, lemme tell ye I don't give——"

"Wrong!" José cut in. "I did not even know you were out of this house. But orders were given long ago that this girl must be watched at all times, day and night; and my orders are obeyed. My men—my 'lousy Indians', Señor Tim—are faithful to me at all times. I have found few white men of whom I could say the same. Indeed, I do not know that I have found any."

Abruptly he turned away. Slowly he walked toward the other end of the house and stood there, looking at the ground. There was a hurt tone to his last words, a sudden loneliness in his manner, a weary droop to his shoulders, that stopped Tim's mouth as if an invisible hand had clapped over it. McKay and Knowlton, too, lost their angry flush and looked queerly at Tim, then at the dejected figure of Nuné. There was a silence.

With the same weary movements, José came back again, looking now at the little head of Montez. Gently he picked it up.

"Here was one man who died faithful," he mused. "Faithful to his country and his commander, though over-bold. It seems that he forsook the river and came up the Yana Yacu, probably thinking to reach the Morona sooner in that way. He met Jiveros. Four of them he killed before the rest could finish him. He was a man."

Tim found his voice. He spoke doggedly:

"Yeah. A reg'lar guy. About this thing over yonder, now, listen here. I ain't makin' no excuses to nobody. But if yer spy said me and her was fixin' to beat it—jest the two of us—he's a liar. The idea was to put it up to cap and looey and see how they felt about cuttin' loose and goin' on our own. Now I don't have to ask 'em. That's all—excep' this much: Any guy that tries to make it hot for Noony for talkin' to me about it, I'll blow his block off. And that's that!"

José shrugged, glancing with a mirthless smile at Nuné.

"I do not blame her," he denied. "It is only natural. And it seems that your *capitán* and *teniente* had the same idea in mind without her suggesting it. *Bien.* Do we understand one another now, and shall we continue as partners? Or do you who have been my comrades wish to go your own way?"

The three looked searchingly at one another. McKay voiced the verdict—

"As partners—we'll stick."

"*Bueno!*" A quick smile lit up the somber face. "It would grieve me much if a Huambiza girl should carry away my three last partners, as the Huambizas have taken away the man who once was partner to all four of us—Señor Dave. Let no more be said. Now we shall make a fitting grave for another white man. Come."

At a sign from him, the loitering Sumatara vanished through the doorway. Silently the five filed out, Tim giving the girl a reassuring pat on one shapely shoulder, but evoking no smile in response. She who had so recently hovered on the bright verge of hope now looked into the black waters of despair, for she knew quite well what use would be made of the Jivero captive—she had heard his fervent promises to lead the way and help to kill the Huambizas of Rana. In her sudden despondency, her former staunch faith in the aid of Piatzo became a broken reed. Her rôle of priestess had slipped rapidly from her in her recent new environment, and now she was only a heart-sick girl.

Machete-men, waiting near, entered the house and fell swiftly to work. With blades and hands they bored in the earth floor a deep hole. Then they refilled it, packed the earth hard, and came out. Of Lieutenant Manuel Montez no trace now remained above ground.

Then other men, in an endless chain, bore

the Jivero bodies inside and stacked them like wood. When that was done, great heaps of thatch torn from other houses were piled around the walls, and on this in turn dry logs and chunks were built up. Soon a hissing, crackling pyre flamed high, and a tower of black smoke ascended and mushroomed out in the upper breezes.

"Roast, you *demonios!*" was the valedictory of José. "Roast here today and burn forever in the place where your father, *El Diablo*, has welcomed you back home. And you, Manuel *mio*, laugh! Laugh loud and long, while above you the chief of this tribe and his men turn to ashes upon your grave. While white men walk this land the murder of a white man shall not go unavenged. And, though we white men may not always agree, we must stand together until death—and afterward."

CHAPTER XIX

THE BIRD OF EVIL OMEN

IN THE same house where Nuné and Tim had entered into tentative conspiracy that afternoon, she and her four companions slept.

The doorway was open, and the moon alternately shone brilliantly and vanished behind drifting clouds. To all appearances, it was an ideal time for such a stealthy departure as Nuné had suggested. Yet things were not as they seemed; for outside, squatting against the wall on either side of the door, wide-awake sentries kept vigil. She knew this; knew, too, that the three Americans were once more at peace with her captor and would not now go from him. So, stoically awaiting some future opportunity for escape, she had given herself to tranquil slumber.

The vigilance of the night guards was not confined to the house of the king. Among the other habitations, too, motionless sentries kept watch, lurking in the shadows of the low eaves, resting easily, yet alert to every sound or movement in the settlement. The Jivero wizard, lying among a score of sleeping Sumataras, also had a couple of personal jailers whose eyes never closed, and whose ready machetes were an effectual discouragement to any attempt at departure.

The other two male prisoners had mysteriously disappeared as soon as it was known that José did not need them—the disappearance being made permanent by a couple of Sumatara spearmen and by the funeral pyre. As for the Jivero women and children, they were to be left free when the White Ones moved on westward, since the army could not encumber itself with them; but they now were being guarded on general principles.

The fire at the central house now had done its work and burned itself out. Within the clearing all was quiet; spying eyes would have seen only a village apparently buried in slumber. And when at length spying eyes did rise above the palisade, that was all they did see.

The dusky, long-haired head in which those slant orbs were set hung just above the top of the wall at the rear, the body beneath it dangling from a length of twisted vines which it had deftly looped over the peak of a stake. That head remained motionless for minutes, scanning the houses within, listening to the muffled snores stealing from them. From the point where it poised, the destruction of the chief's house was not noticeable, as other roofs were in the way.

Reassured, and tiring from the strain of hanging by the hands, the apparition drew itself up and scrambled over. It landed with a slight thump of bare heels and a clatter of bow and arrows slung down its back. Warily it glanced around. Then it stole toward the space where the chief's house should be. The moon, flashing out more brightly as a thin cloud passed off, showed the newcomer to be a gaunt Jivero youth, who limped as he advanced. Around one calf was wrapped a bungling bandage—evidently his breech-clout, as he was stark naked.

At the impact of his fall, hidden guards had tensed. In the black shadows under the eaves, wolfish eyes turned on the limping figure. After a few steps he seemed to sense the menace. He slowed, reaching up to unsling his bow.

With the dazing speed of a pouncing jaguar a sinewy Sumatara sped at him. A hoarse croak burst from the invader. Before he could assume the offensive he was knocked sprawling. The captor fell hard on him, crushing him down.

Other sentries leaped from the shadows and swept the top of the palisade with their eyes. No other head showed. The intruder had come alone, and from afar. His

weakness, his thinness, and his wound indicated misfortune and a difficult traverse.

In the hands of any other White One, his end would have been swift; indeed, he would have been dead when he struck the ground. But it happened that his captor was that *sargento* who had caught the wizard and earned the praise of the king. Shrewdly the warrior saw here a chance to distinguish himself further: to display his prowess again to his ruler. Perhaps this new prisoner might be useful to King José. At any rate, it would do no harm to find out—and to record another point to his own credit. Wherefore the stunned youth found himself yanked to his feet, roughly disarmed, and hustled to the house where slept the commander-in-chief.

José awoke to find one of his sentries beside him, diffidently explaining that a new prisoner waited without. He arose at once and glided outside. There stood the dazed captive, helpless in the iron grip of the *sargento*, who stood with face proudly lifted so that the moonlight would make plain his own identity.

Keenly the Spaniard surveyed both, missing no detail. A slight smile passed over his face, but he spoke gruffly.

"Do you who caught the strong wizard now wake your king to show him this miserable thing?" he demanded. "How came it here? Why did you not squash it like a bug?"

"It came over the wall, and I did squash it," was the somewhat sheepish answer. "But then I thought it might know things useful to my king. So I let it live and brought it here. Shall I kill it?"

José chuckled, pulled his mustache, and gave the *sargento* another look.

"You have a head and you think with it," he complimented. "Some day you may become a *capitán*." Then, eying the captive: "No. Let him live until day. Give him food. Put him in the house with the wizard. And put— Hm! Let me see."

Turning, he surveyed the sentries beside his door:

"Hatun! Here!"

An intelligent-looking warrior stepped forward.

"Hatun, you understand the language of these people. Go now to the house where lies the wizard. Awake some man there and send him elsewhere to sleep. Take his place. Lie still and seem to sleep—but keep awake. Hear whatever is said between the wizard and this new man. In the morning tell me of their talk. Go now."

Hatun swung away. José stood several minutes, saying nothing, giving Hatun time enough to rout out some sleeper and substitute himself. Then he motioned to the *sargento*. The latter, walking on air because of his success, but not relaxing his merciless grip on the youth, went at once. His captive went dumbly, completely bewildered both by finding enemies where he had expected friends and by the fact that those enemies were not slaying him.

With a yawn, José turned lazily back toward his bed. In the doorway he stopped suddenly, a scowl darkening his face. The sentries, too, looked somberly out at the jungle beyond. From it had drifted a dread sound.

Far out, faintly heard, but none the less dismal, a creature of evil omen was wailing under the moon. It was the *alma perdida*—the "lost soul"—whose weird cries spell calamity: a bird, seldom heard and almost never seen, which, according to the legend of the jungle men, learned its harrowing plaint from a child lost and perishing in the wilderness. Again and again it sounded; and now it came more plainly, as if dire doom were creeping closer and closer to the army of the White Ones. At length it died and was heard no more.

Not until then did José move onward to his couch. He said nothing to his sentries. Nor did they speak to one another. They squatted motionless, as before, fixedly regarding the black forest whence the sound had come. And within, where his partners and Nuné slept on undisturbed, José lay staring up at the shadowy roof, troubled by coincidence and memory. Coincidence had brought that foreboding cry hard on the arrival of that emaciated Jivero; and, for no apparent reason, memory jabbed him with the vision of his wives and children weakly guarded in their distant stronghold. The uneasiness which had troubled him before his departure returned tenfold. Too, there arose before him in the shadows the little leering head of Montez, and again he heard his own words—

"So end ambitions in this land of devils."

For a long time he lay there before drowsiness again stole over him. When he slept, the frown still stayed on his face.

THE moon crept downward and vanished. Guards were changed. The dank chill of late night gradually penetrated to the marrow of the new watchers, and they arose and moved about in short patrols. Beyond the wall roared hungry *tigres*, bold now that the light was gone, but baffled by the stockade. Down at the creek frogs hammered in rapid-fire chorus, and somewhere near at hand a tree-toad grumbled in bass tones like a lunatic voicing senseless gibberish. At length the gloom paled; black blots began to take on shape and form; the voices of the jaguars died out, and a new wave of discordant noise began to roll from the trees. Day was at hand, and the birds and animals of the daytime were hurling their waking clamor into the air. And inside the *chonta* walls men and women opened their eyes stretched, and arose.

"Mornin', kink!" saluted Tim, reaching for his cigaret-makings. "We're still here, Noony and all. And this here is a new day—in more ways than one. What's the layout for this lovely mornin'?"

His tone was as jovial as if no rancor had ever arisen, and it was evident that bygones were bygones.

"My first intention is to smoke a *cigarrillo*," smiled José, producing his home-grown tobacco. "Then to eat. Next to put up a good cross over the spot where Montez lies. And then to move out westward. Is that satisfactory to all?"

"Absolutely," agreed Knowlton. "Especially the eats and the moving. Hello, who's this chap? Wants to see you, I guess, José."

At the doorway stood Hatun. His heavy eyes showed that he had been faithful to his trust and lain sleepless all night.

"Ah, yes. I was forgetting. A visitor dropped in last night—a Jivero who seemed to have come far. I honored my guest by allowing him to rest with the wizard, and set this man to hear anything which might be said between them. Probably it is not worth listening to, but I shall hear it now."

He beckoned to Hatun.

"M-hm. Well, I'm going to wash my frowsy face. If there's any new scandal in Jivero society, let me in on it when I get back. Coming, Rod?"

He strode away toward the creek, McKay following. Hatun entered, reported that the pair of prisoners had talked in the night, and proceeded to give an unemotional résumé of their conversation. Tim and Nuné presently lounged out. José stood lazily smoking and patiently listening.

The night-walker, it seemed, had come from a Jivero settlement some days distant at the southwest. It had been raided by Huambizas, and, so far as the youth knew, he was the only male of his tribe to escape. He had been wounded in the leg, but managed to evade pursuers by swimming a creek and climbing a tree, where he remained concealed until the raiders were gone. With great difficulty he had come to this place to attach himself to the Yana Yacu tribe. Arriving at night, he had intended to wait outside the chief's house until morning, but found himself caught by the dreaded White Ones of the East.

Having thus made clear his reason for coming, the youth had then asked the wizard how it came that the White Ones held the place, and had received a fairly truthful answer. Then the wizard, anxious to save his face before even this wretched representative of his nation, had explained his own captivity by declaring that his magic had made the enemy unable to kill him, and that now he remained only because he was thinking a spell on the White Ones, by which they would presently be destroyed.

Hatun paused. José, who had heard with languid interest, nodded and half-turned away. But Hatun had not yet done; there had been more talk, in which the wizard had extracted from the newcomer all possible information about the Huambiza raid; and this the sleepy spy now recited. As he went on, his king began to grow tense.

He swung back to face the narrator. His eyes burned into those of Hatun. The half-smoked bark roll dropped from his fingers. When the tale ended he stood breathing hard and poised as if about to spring.

"*Dios mio!*" he muttered. "That cursed bird of the night spoke truth! *Alma perdida?* We are all lost souls if——"

Outside sounded the approaching feet of his partners returning from the creek. Knowlton laughed at some jest, and Tim's unmusical voice broke out in a ditty:

"The Sixty-Ninth went over the top,
Pa-a-arley-voo!
The Sixty-Ninth went over the top,
Pa-a-arley-voo!
The Sixty——"

"Huh! Whazzamatter, Hozy? Got a cramp or somethin'?"

They were entering. José turned to them a face startling in its gray pallor.

"*Si*—I have worse than that!" he rasped through his teeth. "Listen! Days ago the Huambizas attacked a Jivero place—killed all its men—left the women behind—came east! One boy escaped. He says the Huambiza force was the greatest ever seen. It is led by a black-bearded savage who seems a white man and who fights like a *demonio*. He and his head-hunters are killing all men. They command the women to await their return or be killed whenever caught elsewhere. And they are striking toward my own country. *Si*, they may be already in it!

"While we have been on this Yana Yacu that force has passed us somewhere in the forest. While we have sought a way to reach David Rand and save him, David Rand sweeps down on my helpless ones with an army of the fiercest murderers in the world! ——! May his body rot apart while still he lives! May his soul burn forever!"

His strident voice rose to a yell, and his wan face blackened with passion.

"Cripes!" breathed Tim. "Dave—ol' good-feller Dave—goin' on the war-path ag'inst Hozy's women and kids! 'Tain't possible!"

McKay stepped forward, lifted his ammunition-belt from his couch, and buckled it on.

"I take it that we'll be moving," was his dry comment.

"*Sí!* We move now! We move east!"

Striking the quiet Hatun aside, José shot through the doorway. And as Knowlton and Tim slid into their harnesses and grabbed their rifles, the voice of the King of the White Ones tore across the clearing like the scream of a maddened puma.

"Aillu! Curac!"

CHAPTER XX

RETREAT

ONCE more the village of the Jiveros was under control of its own people. The devastating storm of lead and steel which yesterday had overwhelmed it now had swept away, leaving behind it a brooding silence and a vast emptiness.

Not that it was actually empty. Among its huts moved human figures, passing to and fro and round about; but they moved in a lost, aimless fashion, as if dazed and unseeing. They were the women of the place, freed for the first time in their lives from male dominance, and utterly at a loss as to what to do with their sudden liberty. Of all the men who on the previous morning had been their mates and masters only one remained—the wizard. And he was no longer the master of any one—even of himself.

His impotence was due directly to the fact that Curac and Aillu were gentlemen of fixed ideas and ruthless efficiency. On receiving their king's urgent orders to embark their men instantly for a return eastward, they had paused long enough to inquire—

"Do we take with us the Jivero men?"

To which José, seething with rage and hate, had snapped—

"To the —— with them!"

It pleased those implacable warriors to interpret this as a command and to put it forthwith into execution. So the wizard and the refugee now lay side by side in the house where they had spent the night, gazing sightlessly at the roof and speaking not at all.

So far as the wounded youth was concerned, the sudden drop into oblivion undoubtedly was a stroke of mercy. His untended injury was so gangrenous that not even the wizard could have saved him. And as for the wizard himself, the only good Jivero wizard is a dead wizard.

To this lifeless pair of men the women drifted in groups, standing and staring in dull apathy. Then they drifted away, to congregate at the pile of ashes into which all the rest of the men had vanished, and under which the deep-buried head of their last victim still grinned in the fire-baked clay. Whenever some woman should take the initiative, the wizard and his companion would be carried into the forest and left to the mercies of the tiger-footed Chaquicuna, and thus would disappear the last fighter of the tribe. Soon their bones would be obliterated by the jungle débris as permanently as the last relic of Montez had been swallowed up by the earth. And when the winds and the rains should disintegrate the ash-heap, no marker would be left to show where Montez lay. There had been no

time to erect his memorial cross. When every energy is needed for the benefit of the living, the dead must shift for themselves.

Beyond the palisade remained no trace of the conquerors except trampled tracks. No canoes, of either Sumatara or Jivero make, lay at the shore. On the gloomy creek itself not even a ripple told of the coming and going of the army. Its mouth was empty, and the Yana Yacu above it was empty. Below it, a narrow, wet margin above the water-line on both shores was all that told of the passage of a hurrying host whose keels and paddles had hurled the water to either side. Already that rushing flotilla was well down-stream, swooping around curve after curve and dashing toward the Pastasa as if pursued by all the demons of all the jungles of the world.

They sped in the same formation as before; Curac in the lead, followed closely by the king and McKay and the girl, trailed hard by the paddlers of Knowlton and Tim. Curac now was not scouting; he was plying a mighty paddle and setting the pace, goaded now and then by a harsh bark from José. No precautions were taken against the chance that some enemy might have stolen into the Yana Yacu behind them. If such should be the case, the flying column would ram head-on into the foe, smash it with furious attack, and dash on. The human water-snake now was mad for speed.

And yet, their king had not told them why they should drive at such a pace. He had not even hinted at the reason why they were taking the back-track. His only commands to Curac and Aillu had been to rush for the Pastasa. But, in that mysterious way in which knowledge creeps through a fighting force, the men had grasped the truth. Perhaps Hatun had talked. Perhaps these warriors, who never before had seen their ruler retreat, instinctively felt that a black danger was sweeping into their own land. At any rate, they knew well enough that their enemy now was not in the west but in the east, and that they must break paddles, backs and hearts to reach and attack the menace.

Except for his occasional nags at Curac, José kept his mouth shut hard. His face was flint, his eyes hot coals burning behind slitted lids, his hands a pair of talons gripping his rifle as if throttling an assailant. McKay, expressionless as a wooden idol, sat immobile, figuring on the time of their journey. To reach the Jivero settlement had taken nearly six days of steady going, four of which had been down-hill land marching and down-stream water travel. Now they must buck the Pastasa current which had aided them, climb the trails which had sloped easily downward before them; they would do well if they reached the stronghold again in a week and a half. So he calculated, and so his partners in the following boat also figured. And where were the Huambizas now? Ahead or behind? The leering fantom of War alone knew, and he was not telling.

Meanwhile Nuné rode in amazed perplexity. She had no key to the riddle of this sudden frenzied retreat. She had not returned to the house at the same moment as Tim and the others; else she might have caught a clue from the word, "Huambizas." So she knew only that some tremendous thing had come about, and that she was being borne fast away from the western land which she had hoped to reach. The only solution that occurred to her—and this seemed most unlikely—was that these White Ones had been stricken with sudden fear and dared not go nearer to her people.

Noon passed without a slackening of speed. The paddlers were working at too high a pressure to be aware of hunger. Their faces were masks, their bodies machines, their stout hearts dynamos driving them with ceaseless power. McKay, who had thought of suggesting to José a brief halt to let the men eat and renew their strength, changed his mind. Their endurance showed no sign of slackening, and until it should do so there would be little sense in pausing. So they surged on, and on, and on.

Sundown drew near. In the minds of the idle Americans, who had lunched on tubes of monkey-extract while the boats hurtled onward, grew astonishment at the toughness of the Sumataras. Those warriors had not eaten breakfast or lunch; had not paused an instant from that killing stroke. Looking back, the observers noted that mouths were open, teeth grinning fixedly, jaws hanging rigid—sure indications of exhaustion and approaching collapse. Yet the machine-like drive of the arms and shoulders continued unbroken.

"José!" snapped McKay. "You're killing them! Let up!"

"Soon," acknowledged José without turning his head.

A few minutes later they shot out of the Yana Yacu and were in the Pastasa.

José barked once more at Curac. A hoarse grunt floated back. The prow of the pilot-boat turned slightly down-stream, heading toward a sandspit on the farther side. The body of the water-snake followed its head, crawling steadily out of the creek in a long line. Pushed by the current, it drifted downward while it crossed the river, and curved into shore below the point. Canoe after canoe berthed snugly beside its predecessor, forming a row of river-beasts resting side by side, noses on the sand. And as each grounded and abruptly stopped, its men simultaneously bowed—and stayed bowed; their glazed eyes staring blindly at the bottoms of their craft, their lungs heaving like those of creatures utterly spent, their muscles powerless to lift them erect.

THE four white men leaped out, guns ready, eyes searching the sand for foot-prints and the trees for lurking foes. The only tracks were those of birds and beasts; the only movement in the bush, that of hastily departing monkeys. But the patrol scouted along the whole length of the beach before it relaxed and came back at a more leisurely gait. Meanwhile the Indians had caught their wind and thrown water on their heads, and now they were stiffly emerging from the canoes.

With one accord they flocked to the open beach beyond the boats and bathed. Returning refreshed, they walked with heads up and backs straight, as if ready to resume their grueling race at once. But this was only pride and Indian bravado. The famished speed with which they bolted their meat and *masata*, and their sluggishness afterward, proved that their vital forces were burned low.

The whites fared like the rest, no fires being built—indeed, there was nothing to cook. They ate paste, drank river-water, and were done with it. José was broodingly taciturn, smiling faintly only once. That was when he intercepted a glance by Nuné at Tim.

"If she should ask you to walk with her, friend Tim," he suggested, "it would please me if you did not tell her that the Huam—that her people are near."

Tim nodded. And when the girl did walk away, with an inviting look at him, he followed readily enough; baffled her questions for a time; and then told her it was believed that some Jiveros were near the Pastasa. Which was true enough, but did not explain the mad dash to this point, where no sign of Jiveros showed.

The sky was clear, and the Indians scented a dry night. No shelters were built. At the coming of the dark, the White Ones stretched on the sand, loosely holding their weapons, and slept like the dead. And now the four who had sat idle during the day took on the burden of the night watch. José and McKay, silent and alert, patrolled up and down in the gloom until the moon rose, then took fixed posts at either end of the line. Knowlton and Tim were aroused about midnight and watched until daybreak. Unbroken peace ruled throughout the night. Not even a wandering jaguar came near the fireless bivouac. But King José had the assurance that his faithful men were protected as they deserved.

At the first streak of dawn and the first note of the morning chorus, the White Ones sprang awake. Before the sun had fairly hit the western bank their dugouts were swinging out around the point and heading up-stream. Cruising near shore, where the current was weakest, they crawled doggedly upward until the fierce heat of afternoon was upon them. Then Curac waggled a signaling hand toward the bank, and his prow turned in that direction. His paddlers, reaching the shore, arose and swung machetes against obstructing bush. Into a gloomy canal the boat worked its way. As always, the others followed in file.

The new watercourse was tortuous and snaggy, but short. Presently it widened out and became a long lagoon, dotted with muddy islets densely overgrown, and rank with water-plants; a slimy, dismal place, fetid and swarming with mosquitoes. But open channels and lack of currents allowed a fairly direct route and fast time, and the column drove inland at high speed.

Suddenly, as the boat of Curac swept close to the reedy shore of an islet, a hideous form shot from nowhere and struck the canoe. With a strangled yell its men were hurled overboard. The dugout rolled over and over, caught in a huge scaly coil. Then, before the paralyzed men in the canoe behind it could lift guns, the boat and the

coil together disappeared in a smother of foam. A moment later the canoe arose and floated sluggishly, its sides splintered as if scraped by a gigantic rasp.

The monster which had struck it was gone. So was one of the crew.

Curac and the six remaining paddlers swam desperately to the nearest canoes and were hauled in. Other boats cruised about in a flurry, men jabbing lances into the mucky bottom or seeking signs of the vanished victim. Nothing was found.

The empty canoe, though cracked and water-logged, was still serviceable. So it was bailed out with gourds, the paddles and such weapons as floated were recovered, and its crew reentered it. Their guns, of course, were lost forever. Soon the line was speeding forward again.

"It seems," said Nuné composedly, "that Yacumama now does not favor the White Ones."

José glared and spat curses on Yacumama and every other heathen god. The girl looked calmly over his head.

Late in the day, the brigade plowed to a stop at the base of a steep hill covered with heavy timber. Ever since leaving the river, the course had led generally northeast. José was obviously taking a short-cut toward his stronghold, and this was the end of the water travel. The shore where they landed was gravelly and firm, and, though no path was visible, the ground above would offer passable going, since undergrowth would be scant.

With a squint at the westering sun, José gave the order to march forthwith. The canoes were hastily tied to whatever came handy, and up the slope clambered the scouts and pathmakers, machetes ready for action against all obstacles. With the unerring instinct of their breed, they swung rapidly along through the pathless wilderness above, dexterously laying down a trail for the column to follow. An hour later all were well inland, on high ground, away from the insect plague which had haunted the lagoon. There camp was made.

"Tomorrow," said José, "we shall come into one of our forest paths. In another day we shall reach my home camp. *Madre de Dios!* How long are these days!"

The three nodded, knowing what was gnawing at his heart.

"Any watch tonight?" asked Knowlton, stifling a yawn.

"None. If our enemies are in this land they are following some path, and no path is near this spot. Sleep early and long, *amigos;* you will need all your strength tomorrow."

The promise proved to be no jest. When the long file broke out into a faint, narrow path the next forenoon it struck into a swift swing which taxed the legs and lungs of the Northerners to the utmost; a gruelling stride which was not quite a lope, but which bored up into the hills at a terrific pace. When noon came and José called a halt, Tim welcomed the cessation with a groan of relief. The others, though they swallowed the groans, were as thankful as he.

"Any of your log drums along here, José?" asked McKay, when his breathing had become normal. "Been listening for one."

"Not here, but farther on." The Spaniard cast a look ahead, showing a slightly worried expression. "This is a hunters' track. But it joins one of the better paths, and at that place is a *tunday*. I do not know how far ahead my first scout is now——"

A rapid, faint pad of feet interrupted him. From the path beyond them loped a runner. Before he had reached the side of José he was jerking out a brief but ominous report.

José half rose from his squat, then slowly sank back. For a moment he stared at his comrades, his jaw-muscles bunching with the strain of hard-set teeth. Quietly then he said:

"The scouts have reached the *tunday*. There they expected to find three signalers. Instead, they found the bones of three men—without skulls. And there are tracks of many savages who have gone up into the hills."

CHAPTER XXI

TWO CHIEFTAINS FALL

THROUGH the jungle, on the last lap of the long race with their fiercest foes, the war-dogs of the son of the Conquistadores tore like a great pack of voiceless wolves.

Before their speeding feet ran the plain track of the Huambiza horde, and before their minds hung the dread vision of their women and children helpless in the power of those killers from the west. Behind them—far behind now—lay their food-packs, their paddles, their hammocks, everything except their weapons and one

small meat-tube apiece; for all impedimenta had been abandoned for the final dash up into the hills. Behind them also, doggedly plodding onward but hopelessly distanced by the raging warriors, came the three North Americans and Nuné. McKay, keeping his head when battle-fury swept the entire White Indian force into mad speed, had refused to allow the desertion of his own and his mates' equipment—which consisted mainly of cartridges; and Nuné, unasked and unasking, remained with them. José was dashing ahead with his men.

"Let 'em run," was McKay's dictum. "We'll hold our own gait and finish fresh."

"Right," seconded Knowlton. "And when we finish we'll do what we came here for—get hold of Dave if we can. That comes first, and smearing the Huambizas runs second."

"Humph!" grunted Tim. "Ye got things hind-end-to, I'm thinkin'. 'Twill take some good stiff gun-work to pry Dave loose from his gang. Hope we do git a li'l' action, anyways. If Hozy mops up before we git there——"

"Don't worry," McKay smiled, tight-lipped. "There'll be something doing."

No more was said. Hunching forward under their burdens, glancing to right and left with habitual vigilance now that they were alone, they marched steadily along the mucky road beaten plain by the hosts ahead. And the girl, nude and lithe, trailed them with tireless tread and with never a word.

At length McKay paused, an uplifted hand commanding attention. From somewhere to the left front, felt rather than heard, came a series of vague thudding impacts which quickened into a rapid roll; the air-shocks of increasing rifle-fire whose blunt explosions were deadened by the intervening jungle. Vague though it was, that ragged rhythm beat on the senses of the veterans like the nerve-thrilling rattle and boom of an old-time drum-corps.

"Cripes! They're at it!" erupted Tim. "Le's go!"

And they went. McKay, who had ordered restraint, now broke his own command and plunged forward at double time, the others hard at his heels. Yet the pace set by the captain was not the heart-straining top-speed at which the White Ones had coursed along; it was a distance-eating stride which still left something in reserve.

As they advanced, the noise of battle grew more heavy and unmistakable; the air-blows became thumps blending into a low thunder. At length, as the Northerners scrambled up a steep slope among rocks, the roar of conflict seemed to burst upon them as if a door had swung open. They had reached the mouth of the cañon through the cliffs. The fighting was inside the mountain bowl, and its tumult was muffled by its inner slopes, except here in the rocky rift of egress. In a few more paces it became deafening, the echoes of shots and yells reverberating between the walls with stunning force.

Half-way through, McKay checked. The way was blocked by a chaos of boulders hurled from above by the guardians of the gateway. A taint in the air told that beneath those stones lay crushed Huambizas; told, too, that the dead had not lain there many hours—else the reek would have been unbearable. Now there was no sign of the warders at the top, nor of any other living thing along the cleft. Evidently the head-hunters had, like a horde of army ants, hurled themselves forward over the bodies of their slain fellows in an irresistible stream; and the first ones to get through had swarmed up the inner slope and finished the guards.

For a moment the four paused in that slaughter-pen to catch the breath lost in the last climb. Then, as the men of José had done before them, they worked their way upward, pulling themselves over the rubble and forging on toward the fight. All the way to the inner end they found blood-stained stones, but not in such heaps as at the first barrier. It was apparent that the guards, too few to cope with so large a force of raiders, had held the invaders at first, but then had leaped along the brink in a frenzied, futile struggle to keep crushing the head of the column.

Here and there, as they progressed among the more thinly scattered blocks, they saw dead Huambizas lying as they had fallen under the smashing missiles. At each they glanced keenly, speaking no word. They were seeking, though dreading, a glimpse of the body of their quondam partner, David Rand. They found no sign of him.

Then they were through. Nowhere had they spied a dead White One or a live Huambiza. Now they saw at one glance where the surviving Huambizas were—at

the central acropolis on which were clustered the royal houses of José. Intervening tree-tops blocked all view of the fight raging there, but at that point rose a haze of blue smoke, and from there rolled the infernal noise of combat. The head-hunters had penetrated to the heart of José's kingdom. Whether they had yet captured it was not clear.

McKay flung a quick look up and down; nodded, and strode down the path. A couple of rods below, he turned abruptly aside into a branch trail which angled upward again. It was the route usually followed by the guards in climbing to their posts of vigil. Up this surged the captain and his comrades, to halt at the top of the cliffs. There, where the watchers of the cañon had made their last stand, lay their jumbled bones, headless and picked bare by vultures. But the newcomers bestowed only a fleeting glance on this grim débris of the Huambiza foray. Their eyes went ranging out across the gulf to the focal point of the present mêlée.

As if to aid them, a gusty breeze went swooping across the bowl, shoving the smoke-haze aside and giving the observers a clear glimpse of the central rock. Its top was alive with tiny active figures, fighting against enemies down below. But whether those enemies were Huambizas or Sumataras—whether the White Ones still held their eyrie or the head-hunters had scaled it and were now holding off the avenging force of José—could not be told at this distance. The one thing certain was that much gun-fighting was going on in the enshrouding forest at its base.

"Looks to me as if the Huambizas were still down below," judged McKay, "and José had caught them from behind. If he can herd them between his men and the rock and keep them there, he's got them. Otherwise it'll be a long fight. Well, let's go."

With a final look to their guns and a loosening of pistols and machetes, they started downward at a plunging lope. After them, forgotten, still trailed Nuné—but not the same Nuné who had gone up the path. Once more she had donned her robe, and in her right hand was gripped the gold cross of the mad *Padre*. At last she had caught the name "Huambizas," which made the furious haste of the past few days suddenly clear to her. As suddenly, the jungle nymph had been transformed into the priestess of Paitzo, and she now was going into battle as coolly as the veteran fighters whom she followed.

In long leaps the Northerners descended the zigzag track, outdistancing the girl. On the lower level they ran ahead without caution, following the path by which they had first come in, until they passed the stockade wherein the Jivero women had been confined. The trampled condition of that path showed that both the invaders and the pursuers had traveled it before them; and the absence of dead or wounded men proved that the Huambizas had all been concentrated at the central rock when the Sumatara warriors arrived. In their eagerness to storm that stronghold and their ignorance of the fact that their foes were behind and not before them, the savages from the Morona had neglected all precautions against attack from the rear.

Now the gun-fire was dying out and the fiendish yelling of the combatants came more clearly. Either the ammunition was running low or the opponents had come to the stabbing, throttling, rending hand-to-hand stage of the fight. At the entrance to a by-path McKay halted again, and the three listened to the uproar beyond, gauging the strength of the battle by its noise. The worst of it seemed to be just ahead.

"Rod!" yelled Knowlton, flashing a glance along the by-path. "Down here! Take 'em on the flank! This path curves around—remember it? Brings us out among rocks under the cliff—good cover."

The tall Scot nodded and his lips moved, but his words were lost. The nod was enough. The blond man and the red one double-timed down the narrow way, McKay following.

As Knowlton said, the detour led around to the base of the beleaguered mesa, crossing the cleared space and then entering a rubble of boulders. Along its course were several habitations, all of which now were deserted, so far as the three runners could observe. It was not until they had reached the clearing that they sighted any life. Then they found both life and death in plenty.

THE space immediately before them, between trees and stones, was empty. But only a few rods farther away, at the left, was the edge of a seething maelstrom of battle. Whatever formations might have been held at first—if, indeed, there had ever

been any—were now broken into a weltering chaos of individuals fighting with the ferocity of a blood-hatred centuries old; a howling, hurtling, heaving mass without cohesion or sense, madly slaughtering itself. Down on it rained stones and other missiles hurled from the precipitous plateau towering above. From it rolled a reek of powder-smoke and fresh blood. Rifle-shots thumped, arrows flew, machetes and spear-heads glinted redly under the westering sun, close-locked antagonists wrestled and tore and fell and were trampled into the crimson soil. How far along the curving wall that homicidal conflict extended, and how the fight was going, the three men crouching at the edge of the trees could not discern.

"Aw ——!" boomed Tim. "We can't do nothin'! If we open fire we'll likely kill some o' Hozy's gang—can't tell who's which in that mess! What's the word, cap? Tear into 'em or set tight?"

"Hold your fire."

McKay and Knowlton scanned the cliff. The portion facing them was blank, the shelf forming the only ascent being farther to the left, above the fighting horde. The jumble of big boulders across the clearing, against the precipice, would make almost invulnerable cover and enable them to crawl into a commanding position.

"All right," decided McKay. "Rush those rocks!"

They broke cover and rushed. For all the attention they received, they might as well have walked. The mind of every warring Indian was concentrated on his hereditary foes, and the arrival of a puny handful of white men meant less than nothing even if seen. So the three reached the rocks unnoticed, vanished among them, and, finding a faint path leading upward, worked rapidly higher and nearer to the center of conflict.

Soon they were well above the horde and peering down from a small cañon between jagged blocks of stone. Viewed from this point of vantage, the confusion was a trifle less bewildering. Though the tide of battle constantly ebbed and flowed, it became evident that a force of brown-skinned, long-haired warriors fought with their backs to the cliff, facing a seething mob of men much lighter of hue and shorter of hair. In the main, the Huambizas were quite well bunched, while the attacking White Ones were eddying back and forth, being hurled back time and again but ever boring in with undiminished fury.

"By cripes, them Warm Beezers ain't collectin' no heads from Hozy yet!" bellowed Tim. "Got all they can do to hang on to their own. See Hozy or Dave anywheres? I can't make out nothin' but Injuns."

A long, keen gaze at the writhing mass ended in head-shakes. In that welter no individual could be distinguished. But McKay saw something else which held him quiet a moment, then decided him as to the tactics of his three-man attack.

"Look over yonder!" he yelled. "That point of rocks! White Ones are trying to cut through and roll up the Huambiza flank. Fire into the Huambizas there!"

"That's the dope," approved Knowlton.

He swung his pack to a niche where he could readily draw on his reserve ammunition. McKay and Tim did likewise. A moment later they were lying prone on a hot slab and aligning their sights on the brown men at the point designated by McKay.

Firing at will, with the rapid precision of trained shots, they dropped head-hunters in swift succession. The Huambizas opposing the Sumatara wedge began to crumple up, and the White Ones bored deeper. Reloading from their web belts, the sharpshooters poured another blast of concentrated fire into the same spot, and a veritable path opened before the light-skinned battlers. They surged into it with the speed of flood-waters sweeping into a newly breached channel. Before the divided mass of head-hunters could close and crush them, the deadly gun-fire from above was widening the gap, and more exultant Sumataras were pouring in, penetrating farther cliffward by their own vindictive prowess. When the belts of the Americans were empty, a lance-like lane of White Ones had pierced deep into the Huambiza horde, and the left flank of the savages was virtually surrounded.

Arrows began to rattle on the stones near by. A slug fired from some ancient gun flattened itself against a boulder, a yard to one side. The nearest Huambizas had at last located the spot whence poured the devastating, smokeless rifle-fire, and were sending up a few desperate shots to silence it. Tim leaned out, shook a fist, thumbed his nose, and hastily withdrew, just in time to dodge an accurately driven arrow. Chuckling, he crawled back to his pack and began digging up fresh cartridges.

Knowlton and McKay also drew back a little, laying down their hot weapons and resting their eyes, which ached from the strain of squinting against the slanting sun. Tim, after dumping his flat boxes of .30's from his haversack, took time to unstrap those of his companions for the next need. So several minutes passed before the three slid forward again with full guns and open cartridge-cases. And then they did not resume firing.

In those few minutes much had taken place. The White Ones had made good their thrust into the lane opened by the white men's guns and were fighting like fiends. The Huambiza left flank, battling three ways, was writhing like a nest of snakes, squirming about within itself in abortive advances and retreats. Now a wedge seemed to be forming at the farther side and driving toward the rocks where the Americans lurked. Rapidly it gathered strength and came on with increasing speed—a spear-head of Huambiza warriors, thrusting through the tangled ranks of their own fellows. As it came on, the hidden gunmen voiced sudden ejaculations. In that driving wedge they had glimpsed a white man's face, black-bearded and black-haired.

"Dave!" barked McKay.

"Dave!" echoed Knowlton. "It's old Dave!"

"Yeah! By ——, it's him!" vowed Tim. "Him and his hellions, comin' right to us—nope, they're headin' for the end over yonder. Cripes! They got a guy there—draggin' him out o' the mess—looks like another white man! Yee-ay, Dave! Look up here! Da-a-ave!"

His yell went unheard. The white man plunged on with his savage satellites, dragging the form which Tim had spied. They shoved other Huambizas aside with ruthless roughness, intent on their own purpose.

"Get down the path!" snapped McKay. "We'll grab him— Hold on! Wait!"

The flying wedge had deflected toward them. It crushed its way through to the rocks. Not more than fifty feet from McKay and Knowlton and Tim, and in plain sight, it stopped among boulders. Yet none of the grisly warriors looked up at the Americans, or seemed aware of their existence.

The white commander of the head-hunters—muscular, streaked with dirt and sweat and blood, ferocious as any of his savage allies—turned to his men with a harsh grunt. The pair following him loosed their holds on the limp form they had been hauling through the press. It fell, rolled over on a slanting stone, and lay motionless, face upward.

Bleeding from several wounds, senseless and perhaps lifeless, José Martinez, King of the White Ones, lay there in the power of David Rand, leader of the Huambizas.

Rand spoke, his rough voice carrying to the tense watchers above!

"Wake up, you —— swine! Look alive and talk!"

With the words he kicked the prostrate man with a leathery bare heel. José made no answer. He could make none.

"Talk, you rotter! Tell what you did with——"

"Rana!"

The clear call broke from the boulders above him. Out from those rocks, leaping downward with agile grace, came Nuné. Huambiza faces lifted, heavy Huambiza jaws dropped, blood-shot Huambiza eyes stared at the slim figure descending with gold cross blazing in the sun. Rand whirled and stood as if petrified. A few seconds more, and the girl stood before him, flushing, laughing happily, searching his fierce visage for the welcoming smile of which she had dreamed for weary weeks. Amid the hideous barbarity of jungle war, the priestess of Piatzo had at last returned to the man she loved.

And then McKay, expert rifleman in the United States Army and dead shot in any part of the world, slid his rifle forward. Coolly he drew a bead on his old-time partner. The gunshot cracked wickedly among the rocks.

Rand fell as if smitten by a thunderbolt.

CHAPTER XXII

AT BAY

"COME on! Get 'em!" rasped McKay. While his astounded comrades stared at him, he sprang up, leaped back to the path, and bounded down it. Automatically they jumped up and dashed after him. Almost together, the three swerved sharp to the right, leaped from rock to rock, and burst into view of the gaping Huambizas. Only a few feet below them, Rand lay across the body of José.

"Tim! Hold 'em!" snapped the captain, passing his pistol to the Irishman. "Come on, Merry! Make it fast!"

Tim, gripping the proffered side-arm, grunted comprehension and drew his own. Dropping his rifle, McKay yanked his machete free and sprang down, landing within arm's length of the head-hunters and close beside the unconscious white rivals. The instant his feet struck he swung the blade sidewise, slashing Huambiza throats.

The impact of Knowlton's feet sounded beside him, followed by the ripping roar of the lieutenant's .45. Huambiza faces, contorted with rage, went blank and fell backward, cascading blood from holes in their foreheads. Other head-hunters staggered and collapsed, clutching at jugulars severed by the Scot's flying blade. So daring and deadly was the suicidal attack of the white men that no retaliating thrusts reached them; indeed, the savages gave back in momentary panic, dodging the red steel and the thundering hand-gun.

"Now! Grab and go!" barked McKay, his iron face unchanging. "Tim! Snap into it!"

With the words he dived at Rand; heaved the limp body up on his shoulders, and turned to climb. Knowlton seized José. Above, Tim went into action with both pistols to cover their retreat, crashing bullets into head-hunters who surged forward the instant the pair stooped.

Then Nuné sprang. Stunned for the moment by the fall of Rand, she now flashed into violent assault on the man who had downed him. Screaming, she leaped like a tigress upon McKay, clawing, tearing, yanking at him in blind fury.

The captain, struggling up a rock, staggered under her weight and nearly toppled backward. Knowlton, just behind and carrying José like a sack of flour, lunged ahead and butted the tottering man in the back, restoring his balance. McKay half-turned, dropped his machete, shot his right arm around the crazed girl's neck, wrenched her off her feet, and clamped her head against his side. Then, still carrying Rand on his broad shoulders and dragging the girl in chancery, he fought his way on upward.

"Make it—" *bang!* "—snappy, cap!" implored Tim, between shots. "I'm—" *bang!* "—most shot out!" *Bang-bang!*

Horrible yells behind the ascending pair emphasized the urgency. A thrown spear clattered on the rock beside Knowlton.

Gasping with the strain, slipping and lurching on the stones, McKay clambered with desperate speed and incredible strength. Knowlton bumped him again and again, helping him on. Tim, crouching, with eyes blazing and weapons flaming, made every bullet score. His last shot crashed out as the burdened pair lunged past him into better footing.

"I'll hold 'em!" he gritted. "Keep goin'!"

Jamming the empty pistols under his belt, he sank on one knee and seized his rifle. The sharp crack of the .30 and the clatter of the breech-bolt replaced the barking of the .45's. The foremost of the Huambizas, starting a rush the instant they saw the red man drop, sprawled, writhed, and stayed down. With spears grating ominously on the rocks around him, with demoniacal visages swarming below him, he squatted and shot as accurately as if engaged only in rapid-fire target-work on some safe rifle-range at home. When his own rifle was empty he snatched up Knowlton's and hammered away with hardly a break.

Behind him, the others, protected now by the rocks from flying missiles, staggered into the crooked path and drove their quivering legs to a pounding run. Nuné, her struggles weakening, was dragged bumping along in the remorseless arm-grip of McKay. When her captor loosed his hold—in the covert where lay the packs—she fell limp and less than half-conscious, dizzied and dazed. Beside her dropped the body of her Rana, released none too gently by the captain, who then reeled against a boulder and drooped like a spent horse.

"Load—pistol," he panted. "Get—guns. Tim——"

He gestured weakly outward, gasping and half-blinded by sweat.

Knowlton, breathing hard himself, made no reply. He fumbled a fresh clip into his pistol-butt, glanced once at the bloody-headed Rand, and turned back to the path. He had no more than reached it when Tim plunged into sight, running hard and carrying all three rifles.

"Git shells, looey!" yelled Tim. "Shot out! Them hellions'll come over the top now——"

"Got you," cut in the blond man, holding up the ready pistol. "Hustle up!"

As the lone rear-guard reached him, Knowlton plucked one of the empty pistols from his belt and replaced its spent clip with a fresh one. Tim pounded onward with the rifles. Less than half a minute passed before his prediction proved true. Fierce faces and brown bodies sprang into sight at the bend of the path. The vengeful "hellions" were coming.

But, amid that maze of cliff-blocks, not many could come at once, and the bulk of the Huambiza force was not even trying to come—it was fighting for existence against the beleaguering Sumataras. Knowlton's twin pistols flamed, and the leaders went down, one heaving a javelin even as he fell. A twist to one side barely saved the lieutenant, the poisoned head of the missile ripping the slack of his shirt at the waistline. Shooting as he went, he retreated backward along the path, holding off the attackers in front and evading any who might have tried to flank him among the stones. By the time he was at the entrance to their rock-bound sharp-shooting post, McKay and Tim were ready with full guns.

With grim persistence, but with savage stealth and cunning, the head-hunters who had determined to exterminate the white men came on. They crept now among the rocks, abandoning the path where half a score of their fellows had fallen under Knowlton's fire. McKay, scaling a slant boulder whence he could hastily estimate the situation, detected several brown figures slinking below. He promptly opened fire, swinging his gun from man to man as fast as possible, and downing three. The others flattened behind cover. Beyond other rocks, other heads bobbed up, sinking again as the rifle swung in their direction. The captain guessed that at least a score of implacable foes were crawling up to them.

"Back to the edge!" he commanded, sliding down. "Best place. Covers us on two sides—open end's too steep to be climbed—got to watch the rear and overhead. Move out!"

Watchful, tense, he stood on guard while the other two moved their packs, the rival commanders, and the reviving Nuné to the extreme outer end of their narrow alley. As they lifted Rand, Tim took a keen look at the crimsoned head and grinned.

"Creased as neat as a new pair o' pants," he rejoiced. "Dave ain't hurt bad—only knocked cold. But my gosh, what shootin'! If cap had wobbled his gun jest a hair—or Dave had moved jest then—'twould be, 'Good night, Davey'!"

TWO quick shots from McKay's rifle stopped talk and hastened work. But Knowlton, catching the smouldering gaze of Nuné, took time to say:

"Rana lives. He only sleeps. We are still his friends."

Her tragic face lightened, and she drew a quick breath. But no gratitude was in the look she gave him. Had not these men once said that Rana must go away with them? Had they not just shot him down? Friends, indeed!

To the injuries of José they could give only a fleeting inspection, but none seemed fatal. Like Rand, he still was unconscious from a shock to the head—probably a club-blow. A nasty-looking hole under his left lower ribs might or might not be a mortal wound, and he was gashed in several places. In the present exigency he had to lie untended beside Rand in the shade of a boulder. Beside the pair, her back to the rock, Nuné squatted with an assumption of Indian stoicism. There was nothing she could do.

McKay's rifle cracked again. Then he came sidling in, seeing all in one quick survey.

"Watch overhead!" he commanded. "Both sides. I'll guard the rear."

"Path clear?" asked Knowlton.

"It is now," the captain replied with a grim smile. "May not be for long. Watch yourselves."

He faced about and crouched. Knowlton and Tim turned their eyes upward, awaiting the sudden appearance of savage heads on the crests of their flanking stones. If the head-hunters should come a few at a time they would have a fighting chance; but if they should come leaping down in a body it would be desperate work.

Time dragged. From below came the same ghastly chorus of hate and death, the same taint of freshly spilled blood. Near at hand nothing happened. Tim sneaked a look down at the mêlée, turning quickly back with a grin.

"Oh boy! Lookit the hash!" he exulted. "Looey, them tarriers o' Hozy's are moppin' up right! This here left flank is gittin' chopped into meat balls— Umph! Low bridge!"

His rifle licked upward and spat. A snarling shape which had sprung into sight above them collapsed, pitched forward, and flopped soggily down into the little cañon behind McKay. At the same moment the captain fired toward the path, and another brown form dropped on its face. Tim's ejected shell had hardly tinkled on the rocks when he shot again, and a third apparition vanished from the sky-line, sliding down outside. On Knowlton's side no heads appeared.

"Got us located," McKay warned. "Watch for a rush now."

Tense seconds snailed away. Though McKay still watched toward the path, all felt that the rush would come from above—a simultaneous rise, leap, and drop of savages with down-pointed spears, like infantry storming a trench with bayonets. With guns cocked and fingers on triggers, they awaited the shock of impact.

The seconds became minutes. Still no new assailant showed himself. Then above the riot from below sounded sudden sharp yells near at hand—raucous howls of defiance blending with screeches of hateful triumph. The waiting men braced themselves. But no Huambizas appeared.

Blows thudded faintly. Death-screams shrilled. Somewhere a rock grated, sliding under a weight. Then Knowlton's rifle darted to an aim at something above—and poised without firing.

A pair of struggling forms had risen on the right-hand boulder, grappling with murderous ferocity. They fell, kicking, biting, choking, rolling over and over toward the white men. In a sudden scrambling slide they shot headlong downward into the crevice, still tearing at each other. The head of one crunched on a stone, and he went limp. The other, his hold broken, clawed about him, then lurched to his feet, glaring dizzily around. He was a warrior of the White Ones. The one with the crushed skull was a Huambiza.

A crooked grin quirked over the lacerated face of the Sumatara. Hoarsely he panted, with a gesture including the surrounding boulders:

"We come. We kill."

As his meaning became plain, the ready rifles sank. One by one, other White Ones arose on either side, breathing hard and bearing fresh stains of fight; peered down at the whites, glanced around them, and came dropping in. The daring attack of the Northerners of the Huambizas and their retreat with prisoners, followed by vengeful head-hunters, had been seen by some of the White Ones below; and those witnesses had forthwith sped around to the path, ascended it, and scattered to hunt down the hated Westerners. Now the head-hunters were dead.

Down at the base of the rocks, too, the Huambizas were virtually annihilated. The isolated left flank was now shredded into an even worse hash than when Tim had last looked down—cut to pieces and being exterminated by swarming White Ones. Farther along the cliff, the remaining body of invaders was likewise broken up, though not so hopelessly trapped; scattered segments had managed to fight their way out and were fleeing in disorderly rout toward the rock-choked rift by which they had entered—the only exit they knew; others, hemmed in, were desperately seeking a line of escape and not finding it. The infuriated fighters of José had at last gained the upper hand and were utterly smashing their foe.

"Wal, I s'pose this ends our li'l party," growled Tim. "Somebody always has to come buttin' in jest when we're goin' good."

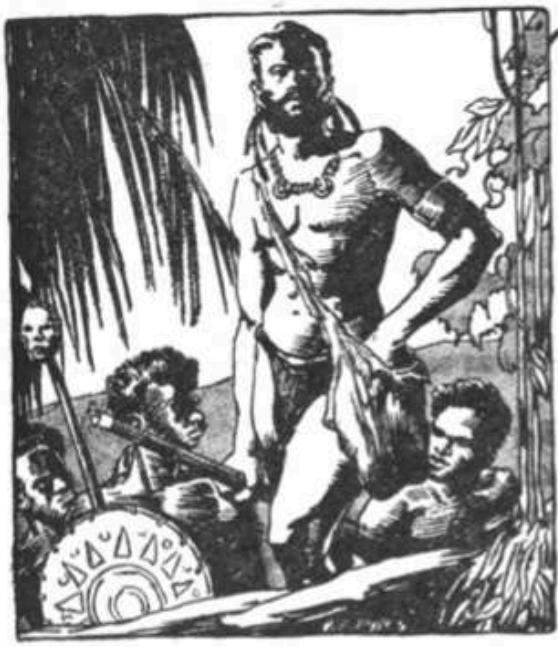
His long breath of relief, however, belied his sour tone.

McKay, turning with a slight smile, opened his mouth to retort, but shut it with a click of teeth. A simultaneous growl broke from the White Ones, a cry from Nuné, and a sharp command from Knowlton—

"Quit that, you fools!"

The eyes of José and Rand, lying face to face, had opened. Oblivious of all else, the two chiefs had glared at each other and then reached both hands for the throat. Now, without a sound, they were striving to choke each other to death.

TO BE CONCLUDED



The King of No Man's Land

CONCLUSION

by Arthur O. Friel

Author of "Thicker Than Water," "The Thirty Gang," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form

BACK to back, three white men — McKay, Knowlton, and Ryan—fought doggedly against foes half seen. They had poor targets—a glimmer of steel; an arrow streaking from a clump of broad-leaved plantain; a dodging movement among a tangle of lianas.

It was an uneven fight, and when fierce yells announced the arrival of another party of savages, it seemed that the white men were doomed. And then the firing in the jungle diminished. From near at hand came sudden splashes, earthy thumps, grunts and snarls of grappling antagonists.

Running feet padded and the jungle erupted a figure as grisly as a buccaneer of the Spanish Main. Indians, all armed with spear and rifle, smeared with the blood of foemen, hard-jawed and slit-eyed, followed close behind him.

"It is José Martinez!" cried Knowlton.

"It is true," yelled José, his teeth flashing. "Welcome back my companions of days gone by. What a killing you have made here!"

"Yeah! And now ye come hornin' in and busting up the game!" snorted Tim.

"Then you shall join mine," retorted José. "But come, I must move."

A little later, after much bloody fighting, the four white men sat in the big hut of the conquered Jivero community, scowling at the roof-pole from which hung a score of human heads.

"We're looking for Rand," McKay said presently.

"Rand!" exclaimed José. "Your friend and mine. I have not forgotten. It was he who first brought you three into this part of the world. He disappeared while traveling in Brazil and you found him alive, but crazed by a bullet, among the cannibals of the Rio Javary, in Brazil. And you cured his craziness by hitting him over the head with a gun."

Knowlton nodded.

"He's disappeared again—we're afraid he's gone back to the jungle."

One of José's men brought in one of the women captives. She was not a Jivero woman but a prisoner brought from the country of the Huambizas away to the southeast. She spoke Spanish perfectly and—was very beautiful. Around her neck a gold cross was suspended. Her name, she said, was Nuné.

She refused to answer José's searching questions but the next morning, proving that she was not ill-disposed toward them, Nuné saved their lives by warning them not to eat the food prepared by the captured Jivero women—it had been poisoned.

By noon the party started back for José's stronghold. Five suns slid across the great green abyss and vanished behind the colossal wall of the Andes. Five nights whelmed the forest in blackness through which moved only the creatures spawned to prey in gloom.

On the sixth day they came to the wonderful domain José had made his own. A stronghold which was practically impregnable; a fertile, sun-lit plateau peopled by healthy, intelligent people who called José "king."

"On the level now," said Tim Ryan after José had explained his system of government and his ambition to make his White Ones so powerful that they could exterminate the murderous head-hunters of the jungle; "On the level now: Don't this king business make ye feel sort of tied down?"

"I ache for the voices and laughter of my own people," José said sorrowfully. "I am a white man. I am not an Indian. Yet among the Indians I must live; in the jungles I must die." He laughed harshly. "King? *Sí*, I have made myself a king and built for myself a prison."

"The King of No Man's Land," copyright, 1924, by Arthur O. Friel.

LATER Nuné told the men the story of her life; of how she had been stolen from her home by the Huambizas; of how a Spanish priest had instructed her and of how, when he had been killed by the savages, she had gone from settlement to settlement, unafraid, her only protection the gold cross given to her by the priest.

Further: she admitted that she loved a white man.

"He is," she said, "a leader of the Huambizas. He owns a gun and is a strong fighter. But he kills only men and will not shrink a head or carry off a woman. His eyes are green. In his hair is a white mark over the left ear. He is called Rana."

"Cripes!" muttered the Irishman. "It's him—Dave Rand!"

There was no doubt about it and, although the three friends were happy in the belief that their search was nearing an end, José was greatly disturbed. The Huambizas were his greatest enemies and, led by Rand, would be doubly powerful and menacing to the peace of his people.

"Rand must be made to see reason," he said, "otherwise he will be killed."

"Who by?" demanded Tim.

"If necessary—by me. Any man who joins the enemies of my people becomes my enemy. And a white man who joins the head-hunters is no more a white man. Before Rand are only two ends: Capture or death!"

Hard on the discussion which followed, came Lieutenant Montez, an agent of the Peruvian Government.

Montez offered José complete pardon for the crimes which had sent him into exile, reinstatement and high honors on condition that he helped Peru checkmate Ecuador's plan to seize the region east of the Andes and north of the Amazon.

It was a tempting offer but José's answer was:

"Say to your commander that I am king in my own land; that I will fight—not as a servant of Peru, but as king of a new nation; that I will remain king of my people and king of myself to the end."

Indignant, swearing to make the Huambizas his allies, Montez was escorted to the borders of José's kingdom by chosen warriors.

And then José hurriedly prepared to make war on the Huambizas, realizing that the existence of his people depended on its successful outcome.

The day of departure arrived. The guards doomed to remain at home watched the living stream of José's warriors, headed by their king, Nuné and his three white friends, pour through the rocky gorge and into the wandering track; watched until the army vanished into the vast green sea of trees beyond.

THROUGH the steaming jungles marched José's men, encompassing many dangers, surmounting many difficulties.

On the third day they attacked a small Jivero settlement and in one of the houses discovered a freshly cured head—the head of Lieutenant Montez. It was at this place that Tim, not wholly trusting José, arranged to go with Nuné and find Rand. But José, informed by his men, stopped them and, after much heated debate, admitted the three friends into his councils.

Later José succeeded in worming information from one of his Jivero prisoners.

"Listen!" José rasped. "Days ago the Huambizas attacked a Jivero place. This prisoner says it was the greatest Huambiza force ever seen. It is led by a white man who fights like a demon. They are striking toward my country. *Si*, they may be already in it. While we sought a way to save David Rand, David Rand sweeps down on my helpless ones with an army of the fiercest murderers in the world."

"I take it we will be moving," was McKay's comment.

"*Si!* We move now! We move east!"

And so the army doubled on its tracks; pushing on madly, racing against time; never resting, never slackening until they came to the *tunday* which marked the first outpost of José's kingdom.

And there, instead of the three signalers they expected to find, were their bones and the tracks of many men who had gone up into the hills.

Panic-stricken, José and his men pushed on at a still faster gait so that McKay, Knowlton and Tim, unable to maintain the pace, lagged behind, and made their way up the hills until they were well above the horde of struggling Huambizas and the men of José. From this point of vantage they dropped head-hunters in swift succession, until their rifles became almost too hot to hold.

José's men seemed to be gaining the upper hand and then, at the head of some Huambizas who were advancing toward them, Knowlton saw a white man.

"It's Dave," cried Knowlton.

"Yeah! It's Dave," echoed Tim. "And look, they've got another white man there."

The other white man was José, wounded, a prisoner in the hands of Rand and his head-hunters.

"Rana!"

Nuné clambered over the rocks and with glowing eyes, laughing happily, joined the man she loved.

And then McKay coolly drew a bead on his old-time partner, fired and Rand fell.

Then the three friends dashed forward and carried away José, Rand and Nuné before the Huambizas were able to realize what was happening. The Huambizas, lacking a leader, sought safety in flight, harried by José's men and the bullets of the whites.

"I suppose this ends our party," growled Tim. His long sigh of relief, however, belied his sour tone.

"Quit that, you fools!" Knowlton said sharply.

The eyes of José and Rand had opened and, oblivious of all else, the two chieftains were striving to choke each other to death.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE KING COMES HOME

THE Sumataras moved forward, glowering balefully at Rand. But the Americans were too quick for them.

"*Alto!*" barked McKay, leveling his rifle from the hip.

The menace of his gun and his steely eye halted the warriors. At the same moment Tim sprang at Rand and Knowlton at José. The grapplers were wrenched apart and held.

"Cut it out, Dave!" admonished Tim. "What the —— ails ye, anyways? Show some sense!"

Knowlton was voicing much the same

sentiment to José, with the added injunction to avoid straining his wounded side. The Spaniard snarled and struggled to break free; but, weakened by his injuries, he was easily restrained by Knowlton. Quieting, he glanced around, sized up his surroundings, saw his men beyond McKay and turned a triumphant gaze on Rand.

"So, Señor Capitán of the Huambizas," he sneered, "you are the prisoner of the White Ones whom you came to destroy, hah? You and your brave woman-stealing murderers caught more than you planned, hah? Welcome, *renegado*, to my hospitality! You have not yet tasted all of it!"

Rand seemed not to hear him. He lay supine, his green eyes wide, his strong jaw hanging loose, staring in stupefaction at Tim. He scowled, blinked, rubbed a hand across his brow and stared again. His gaze turned to Knowlton's blond-bearded profile, then to the uncompromising back of tall McKay. His lips moved twice before he spoke.

"Tim—and Merry—and Rod!" he marveled. "For —— sake! Where'd you drop from?"

"From the States, ye gorilla!" rumbled Tim. "Been thrashin' all over this here country lookin' for ye. Jest caught up with ye today—and cap had to nick yer dome to git holt o' ye, at that. How come ye knockin' round with them head-hunter guys? Gone cuckoo again?"

The green eyes dwelt on his a moment longer. Then they veered to Nuné, hovering near him. A faint smile flickered across his bewhiskered mouth.

"Maybe I have," he granted.

Then, his voice turning hard, he demanded in Spanish—

"Nuné, what have they done to you?"

"She is my slave," José maliciously broke in. "And you——"

"Shut up!" Knowlton snapped, exasperated. "Listen to me, José Martinez. You'd better sing small. Dave's not your prisoner—he's ours! Rod got him—not you, or your whole outfit! And what's more, you are Dave's prisoner! He dragged you right through the whole head-hunter gang, so helpless that you couldn't do that!"

He snapped his fingers.

"He could have cut you into sausage—but he didn't. And the only reason why you're here now is because cap clipped Dave with a bullet and carried him up these rocks in front of the whole Huambiza mob, and I carried you, while Tim held 'em off alone. These men of yours came along a good deal later, while we were taking all comers. For all the good your famous army did you, you were a dead one half an hour ago. I don't know who knocked you out first, but——"

"I did it," taunted Rand. "And I can do it again."

José reddened and started a lunge at him. Knowlton forced him back.

"You shut up too, Dave!" he warned. "Either one of you that starts anything more will have me to lick. That goes!"

"Yeah," seconded Tim. "And if that ain't good enough I'll take the two o' ye and crack yer cocos together. This here war's gone bust. Let it die."

"And one thing more," Knowlton went on. "This scrap has busted up, as Tim says. But it might be going on now—and going against you, José—if we three hadn't opened up the Huambizas with our guns and given your men a chance to cut off their left flank and roll 'em up. You left us away back in the woods, you may remember; but we've come in mighty strong at the finish, and we're still good for a lot more rough stuff if necessary. Now come off your high horse. Let Dave alone. Tell these Indians to get back and give us a free hand. We'll get you up on top. You're about done in."

Under this broadside José glared, growled, but gradually quieted. Suddenly he cackled shrilly:

"Ha; ha, ha—Ouch! *Caramba*, is a spearhead in my bowels? By ——, *teniente*, you have the nerve of the ——! You now will be the king and dictate to me, hah? But you speak sense—and, no doubt, truth. And I owe my life once more to you? It was you who saved me years ago in Brazil. *Bien*. I am too tired to walk now, so you shall help me. The Huambizas are crushed, yes? It is good. Let me rise."

Helped by Knowlton, he struggled up. Curtly he spoke to the Indians, who, though still held back by McKay, were eying the Americans ominously. One grunted in reply, and all their expressions changed.

"They will obey your orders—so long as you do not try to take this man Rand away," added José. "He must be held——"

His words grew indistinct. He leaned heavily on Knowlton, his knees sagging. When the lieutenant laid him down he fainted.

"All shot," said Tim. "Better git him to his women right away. One of 'em, I mind, is a doctor, and a danged good one. How 'bout you, Dave? Feelin' rocky?"

"Rotten headache," confessed Rand. "All right otherwise. Let go of me."

After a searching look, Tim lifted his heavy hands, and Rand arose. He stepped to the edge and stood a moment, surveying the scene of slaughter. Directly beneath him the fighting had ended, and he looked down on a battle-field strewn with warriors who would war no more. To the right remained only a small knot of his men, falling fast under the relentless hacking of three times their number of White Ones. Away toward the gap sounded the wolfish howling of more Sumataras cutting down their routed foes. The last brief chapter of his history as a Huambiza commander was rapidly reaching its conclusion.

As he turned back to the others, however, he seemed unmoved by the catastrophe terminating his recent lurid career. The concentrated gaze of his former partners, too, apparently had no effect whatever on him. McKay had moved inward and stood bleakly regarding him. Tim's blue stare was half-hostile; and Knowlton, now busy bandaging José with strips of his shirt, paused long enough to give him a searching look without warmth.

Now that David Rand was found, and caught red-handed in the act of commanding a lethal attack on the kingdom of a former friend, the dogged loyalty which had brought his other comrades to rescue him was turning cold. They were white men to the backbone, following white men's codes. He was a renegade, a leader of jungle murderers, a white savage who wore the stork and toucan ear-tufts, the tooth-and-claw necklace, the long hair and the tiny loin-clout of the head-hunter, and who had placed himself outside the white man's pale. Yet, knowing their thoughts, he stood calm, impassive, naked and unashamed.

To the unveiled enmity of the White Ones likewise he returned a steady, indifferent regard. His air was oddly Indian, rather than that of a white man; his face expressionless, his bearing stoically apathetic. His green gaze drifted over the little assemblage and then rested again on Nuné. He spoke no word.

Knowlton rose, shirtless and wiping his reddened hands on his breeches.

"He'll do," he said, nodding toward José. "Is the road clear below, Tim?"

"Yeah. Safe enough," judged Tim, after a look at the dying fight of the Huambiza remnant. "Them Warm Beezers are sewed up tight, far's I can see, and that path up the rock ought to be open for traffic by the time we git there. Le's go."

OBEYING a few Spanish words from McKay, several muscular Sumataras carefully lifted their wounded king and, cradling him in their interlocked arms, sidled along the narrow way, grunting to those ahead to move. Reaching the path, they faced forward, raising their burden to their shoulders. Preceded by a vigilant vanguard of his fighters and followed by his captor and his rescuers, José rode down the path as he had come up it—unconscious.

As they went Rand glanced at each Huambiza body lying in the trail, shot down by Knowlton and McKay. Sprawling face down, huddled on their sides as if asleep, or staring sightlessly straight up at the hard hot sky, the dead savages lay as mute reproaches to the renegade white who had led them to their doom. José, under the same conditions, would have ground his teeth and luridly cursed the enemies who had slain his followers. Rand viewed them as casually as the rocks around them. His countrymen, covertly watching, could detect no change of expression, no flicker of emotion in his countenance. He stepped coolly over the dead and ambled onward without a look behind.

As they emerged into the cleared space, the vanguard, which previously had moved in file, bunched around the bearers, their spears and machetes and guns turned forward and aside as a bristling hedge against all comers. The ex-soldiers tacitly closed about Rand and Nuné, covering them on both sides and the rear from any blood-mad Sumataras who might assail the captured enemy leader.

The last feeble resistance by the overwhelmed Huambizas died out as the little band approached, and at once a horde of blood-smeared human wolves bounded at the whites, yelling in ferocious exultation.

"*Alto!*" roared McKay. "Your king lives. Lay no hand on his captives!"

The avengers slowed. All knew this hard-jawed Scot and his mates to be close friends of their king, and his words gave the affair a different aspect. The king lived; that was very good. And the white Huambiza was the king's captive, who would be dealt with in the king's own way at his own good time. The other white men were saving the prisoner for the king's personal vengeance. The Huambiza woman, too, who had been treated with such unseemly kindness, now was evidently an enemy prisoner also. No doubt the king would inflict dire punishment on them both. It was well. They certainly would not interfere with their ruler's plans.

Some of them turned away to search for any possible Huambiza survivors. Others hurried ahead to make sure that the cliff

path was opened. More of them simply walked along as additional escorts, beginning to think of their women and children and hoping to find them safe on the rock.

Progress was slow, for the ground here was literally covered with slain, and small parties of Sumataras obstructed the way while they found and carried out their own dead and wounded. When the beginning of the cliff path was reached another delay was met; for now that path was alive with women and children of the White Ones, bounding down to spread over the battlefield and seek their own men. Sharp yells to the guards at the top, however, resulted in a stemming of the rush. Then the bearers and the whites began the ascent.

Silently they climbed. The path was slippery with blood, obstructed here and there by rock chunks dropped from above and by crushed and mangled Huambiza bodies. The sun, rolling far down, was turning red and casting a sinister glare through the thin haze still hovering over the scene of the fight. Its glow touched the drawn face of the limp King of the White Ones and then was gone, the file of climbers passing into the shadow of the curving precipice. And when the top of the rock was reached and the weary but still ready guards gave free passage, the shadow seemed to have spread over the entire summit, though the sun still shone. It was a shadow of silence, of solemnity, of somber looks from the people who stood motionless there and watched the battle-stained men plod past with their quiet burden.

Across the disordered little tableland marched the cortège, followed by a growing throng of those who had not yet descended the cliff path. Nobody spoke. A funereal quiet held the place, broken only by an occasional distant shout among the warriors down below. As the head of the column neared the family-house, a tall young woman in the regal feather-dress ran forward, and the escort made way for her to reach the side of José. She was Huarma, eldest of the nine sisters who were the wives of the king, and expert in jungle medicine. Wordless, she walked beside her mate, studying him. Then, still unspeaking, she turned on the pair of white Huambizas a gaze startling in its smoldering wrath.

Through his doorway passed José on the shoulders of his men, the low red sun shooting a final blast of heat over him before he vanished into the dusky room beyond. At once the other Sumatara warriors closed before the door, barring the way with bloody weapons. The whites unconcernedly wheeled to the left and marched away, heading for the council-house which had been the abode of the three partners. They reached it, entered it, and coolly took possession, without interference or objection by the guards. But, after they passed in, tall spearmen significantly took post before its only exit.

"You two are our prisoners," McKay laconically stated.

Rand nodded without comment, well aware that these three were his only protectors, but giving no sign of concern for the future. Squatting in Indian fashion, he clasped his hands upon his pain-racked head and was still. Over that bowed head Nuné, ignoring the Americans, extended her right hand and her gold cross, her lips

moving soundlessly and her eyes full of tenderness. Then she sank beside him, timidly resting her other hand on his shoulder. He made no move.

So José Martinez, King of the White Ones, came home: struck down in his own stronghold, captured and kicked by the man whose forces he had masterfully gone forth to smash, borne like a corpse to the care of his women. And so David Rand, fighting chieftain of the Huambizas, reached the end of his power: a prisoner, yet a conqueror; escorted in his downfall by former officers of one of the greatest armies of the world, and doubly blessed by the winsome priestess of Piatzo.

CHAPTER XXIV

AFTERMATH

ONCE more the smokes of steadily-burning fires ascended from the green depths of the stronghold of the White Ones. Once more its men and boys moved ceaselessly along its shadowy paths, the men carrying lifeless bodies struck down by their weapons, the boys transporting fuel to replenish the flaming brands heaped high at certain designated spots. But now the fires were not preparing food for fighters, but consuming the fighters themselves; the burdens brought to them were not the little people of the tree-tops, but heavier, fiercer creatures born to prowl on the ground and destroy their own fellows. Though the gloating fantom of war had sunk again below the horizon, the somber smudges now darkening the sky were more truly a tribute to that evil spirit than those of a fortnight ago. They rose from human sacrifices to his red memory.

At the first light of a new day all Sumatara warriors still able to walk had taken up the vitally necessary work of cleansing their settlement—all, that is, except the worn-out but still watchful guards of the central rock. These latter, without ostentation but without the slightest relaxation of vigilance, held their posts at the top of the path and at the houses where rested their king and the five aliens. Every other male subject of José who could limp along and bear a weight was helping to purge his homeland of the hated Huambizas.

For the dead White Ones—and there were many more of these than King José could well spare—were built real funeral pyres, whereon the fallen warriors were laid with all honor and carefully defended from the flocking vultures until the torches were applied. For the Huambizas, the cremation-piles were thrown together as if for the incineration of offal; and the attentions of the winged ghouls to the head-hunters awaiting disposal were unchecked. Furthermore, the fires consuming the recent antagonists were kindled at long distances apart. Even in their mutual destruction, no Huambizas were allowed to mingle their ashes with those of Sumataras.

To only one of the White Ones was given a more dignified form of funeral—interment, in a great clay jar, beneath the floor of his home: the burial accorded to chiefs. This was Aillu, the grim commander of the White Ones of the king's eastern country. It had been he who led the onslaught into the Huambiza mass which later succeeded in cutting off the left flank; and, after smashing a red lane well into the army of Rand, he had gone down, pierced by half a dozen poisoned spears. Curac, of the perpetual smile, was still alive and grinning, though gashed from head to foot.

Meanwhile, in the little homes, the seriously wounded received the ministrations of their women; those for whom there was no hope stoically awaited the end, while those who were merely disabled heard from their mates the tale of how the horde from the west had burst through the barrier and assailed them.

The thundering alarm of the *tunday* drum at the cañon-entrance had given warning to the people of the bowl, and the terrific resistance of the guards on the cliffs had checked the irruption long enough to allow nearly all of the inhabitants to attain the virtually impregnable summit of the mesa. Of that fight at the entrance no witness now remained; only the mute evidence lying at the rocky rift itself was left to show how the combat had gone. During its progress the warders of the other entrance had remained at their posts, awaiting a similar attack on their side—an assault which never came, as the Huambizas evidently were ignorant of the existence of another portal in the mountain rim. Spreading out after crushing their way through the cañon, the head-hunters had scoured toward the rock fortress beyond, finding only the abandoned Jivero women, whom they left temporarily unmolested.

Meanwhile the women and boys of the

White Ones, reaching the summit, had hastily taken up any available position for defense. All had a passable skill in the use of jungle weapons, and there was a plentiful stock of such weapons in a storehouse on the mesa. These, under the cool-headed direction of the wives of José, had been rapidly dealt out; the fighting queens had armed themselves with rifles and ammunition from the private arsenal of their Spanish lord; and the guards, rushing all their reserve cartridges to the garrison-hut commanding the cliff path, had concentrated their attention on the work of holding the pass.

Then had come the head-hunters—and met a rain of arrows, spears and bullets from the top. For a time there had been comparatively little action on their part; they had kept themselves covered in the trees and reconnoitered all around the citadel, seeking the most vulnerable approaches. At length, finding that there was but one passage and that their howled insults failed to goad the supposed men at the summit into descending, they had concentrated on an attempt to rush the shelf as they had rushed the gate.

From that time—about midday—until midafternoon, when the panting forces of José burst like a thunderbolt upon their backs, the Huambizas had fought with inflexible determination to win their way up, and the defenders to crush them down. Rush after rush had failed, but again and again they came. The women, levering away rock after rock from the wall at the edge, had toppled them into the mass or down on the slippery shelf; the ready guards had riddled all who rounded the turn near the top; and still they tried, with a tenacity astounding in men of the head-shrinking tribes—who usually have no stomach for a long fight with heavy losses. They seemed to be not only devoid of fear, but driven by a commander who cared nothing for casualties.

For a long time the defenders had been virtually unscathed. The head-hunters had few guns, and most of their arrows fell short, struck harmlessly on the stone, or fell weakly into the soil beyond. Three boys were killed—one by a slug, two by poisoned arrows. But toward the last of the fight the guards began to suffer from a nagging rifle-fire. Some man below, with a good gun and an accurate eye, had located exactly the right angle for deadly work; and, despite the protection of their elevation and bullet-proof side-walls, two of the defenders of the path were killed and three wounded.

The shooting of the unseen marksman was timed to coincide with new advances up the shelf, and was obviously intended to aid the rush of the men storming the top. But for the unexpected return of the Sumatara warriors, he might have eventually killed all the gunmen holding the citadel and thereby assured a Huambiza victory. It was strongly suspected—and, indeed, was true—that the enemy sharpshooter was the white chief of the marauders, now held captive in the house of the king.

Thanks to the fact that the Huambizas did not scour the northern portion of the vale, the few women and children who failed to reach the cliff in time to climb it escaped capture, fleeing to the heights beyond and hiding there until the battle was over. On the other hand, the guards at the northeastern entrance, who undoubtedly would have been unharmed if they had stuck to their stations, were killed to a man. They were no skulkers; and when it became self-evident that no enemies were nearing their own cañon and that a furious assault on the citadel was raging, they forsook discretion for valor. Dashing to the scene of conflict and keeping within the cover of the trees, they drove arrow and bullet into their foes until hunted down and beheaded. That devoted little band sent at least five times its own number of enemies ahead of it over the Long Trail.

AND now, while the smoke of the aftermath sullenly arose and the things which had been men crumbled into ashes, the two rulers, victor and vanquished, lay in neighboring houses and gave no thought to what went on around them. José, drained of nerve force and vital fluid, slept or drowsed while Nature and Huarma combined in the work of restoration. Rand, who had gone uncomplaining and uncommunicative to his hammock, now had developed a burning fever and a wandering mind. Each of them was watched continuously by a woman—José by Huarma, in command by virtue of her medical skill and her seniority over her eight sisters; Rand by Nuné, who, deprived

of the privilege of seeking jungle herbs of which she knew, could only hover beside him and try again and again the efficacy of her cross and her naive hypnotism, which seemed strangely unavailing.

Each, too, was visited by Knowlton, who had bandaged José among the rocks and dressed Rand's split scalp after reaching the top. Queen Huarma and her sisters now had heard the tale of how the yellow-haired Northerner had snatched José from under the very noses of the Huambizas, and had also been told that her lord's last command had been that this man be obeyed; wherefore she received him with marked friendliness and allowed him to look at the comatose patient.

The chief impressions which the visitor took away were that the side-wound was a nasty one, but was receiving treatment which probably would result as well as if administered by a civilized physician; that the other injuries were minor in themselves, but had let out much blood which could not well be spared; and that José had a fighting chance and was doing as well as could be expected.

On leaving, he had taken the occasion to mention the fact that José virtually owed his life to the action of McKay in shooting Rand and to Tim's lone-handed battle to cover their retreat; also to intimate that Rand was insane. The first was intended to lodge in the mind of the militant queen—who undoubtedly would take command if José should die—a feeling of obligation to both his partners; the second, to provide a possible line of eventual escape for Rand. He happened to know that the White Ones usually were very chary of harming an insane person.

Concerning the physical condition of Rand he felt no particular anxiety. The fever seemed to be the common jungle sickness, due mainly to the exposures and hardships of the long traverse, and brought to a head by the battle and the bullet-wound; dangerous if not properly treated, but curable by rest and stiff doses of quinin, of which the medical kit held plenty. Externally the head-wound was hardly worthy of the name, only a small section of the scalp having been torn away, and the gouge being easy to clean. There could be no question, however, that even so light a clip by the high-velocity bullet had dealt a stunning shock to the brain. The odd previous history of this man, who once had been crazed for five years by a similar shock and then restored to sanity by a blow with a gun-butt, made his future mental status a problem which bothered all three of the men who had caught him.

They were a sober trio as they sat at the council-board of José that morning, speaking only at intervals, their eyes straying occasionally toward the king's empty chair, then veering toward the doorway leading to the rear room where Rand tossed and muttered. McKay was even more taciturn than usual—in fact, almost morose; for in his memory rankled Rand's last look at him.

"You did this, Rod?" he had said, one hand resting on the bullet-groove which had downed him and wrecked his power.

McKay had nodded shortly, and for a moment gray and green eyes had fronted each other unwinking. Then, without another word, Rand had moved away and lain down in his hammock. But the expression in the green eyes had stabbed to the depths of McKay's unbending soul. It was the look a man gives to the one whom he has trusted and found to be a traitor.

"Wal," said Tim, breaking a silence, "life's jest one dang thing after another, as the feller says. We been tryin' to git Dave, and now that we got him what do we do with him? And is he cuckoo or ain't he?"

"He's as sane as any of us," declared Knowlton. "Or he was, until today."

The red man nodded, scowling at his cigar.

"Yeah, that's what I think," he admitted. "He was steady as a rock yesterday. So that don't give him no alibi for this Injun stuff. But say, mebbe he'll be nutty now from that bullet-crack, and if these gorillas o' Hozy's let him go we can git him away and then bust him one over the bean and knock him sensible again, like we done before. Seems like one smack makes him bug-house and two makes him bright."

McKay grunted dissent, and Knowlton shook his head.

"No chance," he disagreed. "It happened once, but never again. Such things are more rare than lightning striking twice in the same place. If Dave goes off his nut again now he'll have to stay that way. As for what we'll do with him, I don't know any more than you. Depends altogether on how things shape up."

Two nods answered this. With Rand and José both knocked out, the next moves must depend altogether on developments.

So, like the humbler people of the little kingdom, who turned their eyes and their thoughts ever and anon to the tall rock even while clearing away the débris of war, the three bronzed and bearded men at the king's table could only wait: wait for Piatzo, or the other jungle gods, to decree the fates of the stricken King of the White Ones, the fallen leader of the Huambiza—and the girl who had swayed the lives of both.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SHOWDOWN

ANOTHER day lighted up the domain and folkland of King José: a land scoured clean of Huambiza pollution, and a citadel from which a numbing shadow had been lifted.

For days the work of removing every vestige of head-hunter occupation had progressed, the Sumataras combing the byways and the tree clumps and the rock-heaps for any bodies or bones hitherto overlooked, and the smoky fires consuming even the Huambiza weapons and personal ornaments torn away in the fight. Then had come torrential rains, washing every stone and leaf and pounding into the soil every ash. And now, aside from the fact that some of the native warriors lived only in memory and others lay helpless or moved with difficulty, the green bowl was as it had been before its men marched away.

In the little homes the mothers carried on their family tasks, and on the plantations the Jivero women toiled as became their lot; for the slaves, fearing the dreaded Huambizas far worse than their present masters, had barred themselves into their stockade during the battle and voluntarily returned to their usual labors afterward. Up on the heights overlooking the entrances, new guards had taken post; and out at the isolated *tunday* stations beside the main trails, freshly appointed operators watched and listened for the renewed approach of foes. Their vigilance went unrewarded, for the surviving head-hunters were far away and daily fleeing farther.

From the royal mesa to the outer-most listening-post had spread the cheering word that the king had rallied and was fighting his way back to strength. The lacerated side-wound which had been his worst menace now was drained of any incipient infection and beginning to heal, and the other injuries were giving no trouble. Just how he had received that stab under the ribs nobody knew—not even the victim himself. It had been dealt in the thick of the fight, just before his encounter with Rand; and, judging from its appearance, it might have been inflicted by a jaggedly broken spear-haft in the hands of some head-hunter. At any rate, it was not poisoned, and all indications for his recovery now were increasingly favorable.

Meanwhile, Rand had recuperated more rapidly and completely than José. His rambling talk had ceased, his clouded eyes had become clear, his impassive manner had returned. Awaking to full consciousness, he had found himself once more a white man, so far as externals went; for, while his mind wandered, Knowlton had calmly removed the barbaric ear-tufts and necklace and clout, cut his hair and beard close, and put on him a shirt and breeches donated by Tim, whose stocky build approximated that of the sick man.

Except for an odd look on finding himself bereft of his savage ornamentation he had given no sign of any feeling. Nor had he, either during or since his sickness, revealed anything of importance concerning his recent mode of life or his reasons therefor. His fevered mutterings had been incoherent and often unintelligible, and since then he had been almost wordless, except to the faithful Nuné, with whom he talked briefly at intervals in the Huambiza jargon. To his three former partners he was as much of a mystery as ever.

And now, in the big outer room, he was on trial before those three. Facing him across the massive table, McKay sat, flanked on either side by Knowlton and Tim; the captain cold and straight, the lieutenant leaning on his elbows, the sergeant lounging negligently but keeping his eyes steadily on the prisoner. Rand, a little thin from his recent illness, sat calmly meeting the searching gaze of the men who once had rescued him from hopeless misery, had later led him to a fortune—and now had come back to cast him down again. Behind him, loyal as ever, stood Nuné.

Knowlton spoke:

"Dave, it's time for a show-down. I think you know how we feel. We came down to find out what had become of you. We've found out—and we half-wish we hadn't. You know what I mean. And——"

"No. I don't know what you mean."

The interruption came with such unexpected quickness that the others started. Across the inscrutable countenance had leapt a flash, into the green eyes had flared a light, that surprized them as would a gun-shot in an apparently lifeless thicket.

"Huh?" exclaimed Tim.

"You heard me. I don't know what you mean by horning into my affairs. I don't know what you mean by taking sides with José and against me; by helping him to hold a white girl prisoner; by fighting my men and shooting me—from ambush, like —— cowards!"

His self-constituted judges sat speechless, staggered by this frontal attack. As the concluding epithet sank home, a red wave swept across their faces and their eyes narrowed. McKay's mouth became a thin line. But then, slowly, their heads turned toward one another, moved by a simultaneous thought. Three slight nods were followed by a silence. Rand broke it.

"Wrong. I'm not crazy again. My mind is better than all three of yours together. I know enough to mind my own business. You don't."

Knowlton winced. McKay scowled. Tim looked troubled.

"Since when have you been my keepers?" railed Rand. "By what right do you trail me thousands of miles and shove your oar into an affair that lies between me and another man? Who are you, to set yourselves up as my judges?"

Tim, once Rand's bunkie and canoe-mate, thumped a heavy fist on the board.

"By cripes, he's right!" he asserted. "Jest what I was tellin' ye before we started west. When we'd found out Dave was alive and goin' strong I told ye we hadn't no call to butt in and we better haul in our horns and beat it. But then Hozy——"

He paused, frowning and rubbing his chin.

"But then José," sneered Rand, "knowing I might come after him, wound you around his thumb. You trotted along with him like good little boys. You won his fight for him. You shot me for him. You——"

"That's a lie!" barked McKay, leaning forward with fists clenched.

The last thrust had pierced to the rankling sore spot on his soul.

"A lie!" he repeated. "I shot you because that was the only way to get you, you fool!"

"Which changes nothing," retorted Rand. "You shot me for José. He wasn't good enough to get me, so you got me—when I wasn't looking. Don't see how you came so near missing me. Guess you're not so good as you used to be. Getting old and shaky."

The taunt deepened the scowl between the captain's bushy brows, but a blank expression grew beneath them. For a moment he stared. All at once he sat back with a mirthless chuckle.

"Missing! Old and shaky! Ye gods!" he snorted. "Look here, you idiot, do you think I shot to kill?"

"Of course. What else?"

Another silence, while the three stared first at him and then at one another. Then Tim rumbled:

"Wal, whaddye know about that! No wonder he's sore on us. Hey, lookit here, Dave, git this straight:

"Cap never tried to kill ye. He done jest what he aimed to do—knock ye out a li'l while so's we could git ye clear o' that head-hunter gang. Talk about shootin'! Me, I can shoot some meself, but I'd never dast try a hair-splittin' shot like that. Cap jest creased ye; and then he jumped into them there Warm Beezers' faces and spit in their eyes and drowned 'em, so's he could git ye safe into the rocks. And he lugged ye up there, with this here woman o' yourn tryin' to gouge his eyes out while he done it, and the whole howlin' mess o' hellions tryin' to git him from behind. That looks like he was shootin' to kill, don't it? Say, feller, who's been feedin' ye lies, anyways? Looks to me like there was somethin' rotten round here."

This time it was Rand who frowned. It was a frown of bewilderment, almost of incredulity. His head started to turn toward Nuné, but he halted the movement, still studying the belligerently honest Irish face.

Knowlton, watching shrewdly, spoke up.

"Looks to me as if we needed a complete house-cleaning. You were pretty woozy after that crack on the head, I remember,

and the only one you've talked with since then has been Nuné. She's a fine girl and she means all right, but there are a good many things she doesn't understand about this matter, and what she's told you has naturally been biased by her own ideas. If we're ever going to have that show-down and have it right, all the cards have to be on the table. We'll lay ours out first and then look at yours. Fair enough? All right. Now here's what we've done and why we've done it."

For nearly an hour he talked, giving Rand the exact truth: narrating the course of events since their departure from the States, making plain the reasons for all their moves, explaining completely how and why they had been allies of José. Through it all Rand sat silent, various expressions dawning on his face, then fading out. At the end his gaze dropped and dwelt unseeingly on the broad mahogany board.

FOR some time he sat thus, his face unreadable, one hand absently fumbling at a shirt-button as if some subconscious impulse prompted him to remove the white-man garment. At length he looked up again, regarding his quondam partners with a steady gaze from which the bitterness had melted.

"Thanks, Merry," he said in an altered tone. "I apologize. Ought to have known better. But I've been living lately in a world of treachery and suspicion—trusting no man—finding no man worthy of trust. Got the habit, perhaps, of believing the worst of everybody. That's not an excuse; merely a possible explanation.

"I can't lay out my cards as easily as you did, or make them as plain to read. They're unusual cards; you never saw any like them before. Maybe you can't understand them. It's taken me a long time to read them myself. The best I can do is to try to give you the general idea."

As he spoke, the others unconsciously settled back in relaxation. The man now talking was not the harsh head-hunter, nor the sphinx-like captive, but the old Dave whom they knew.

"First let me ask you a rather unnecessary question that may help you understand what comes later," he went on. "When you were in the States did you ever feel inclined to come back to the jungle?"

He was looking squarely at McKay.

"Sometimes," admitted the captain.

"I know. So did the rest of you. I remember one of our little reunions—just before you sailed for Europe, Rod—when we half agreed that we'd come back sometime and explore the Tapajoz river, south of the Amazon, just to see what sort of fellows the Mundurucu Indians were. We didn't care anything about the Mundurucus. We just felt the jungle call. We said we'd do it sometime, whenever we got fed up on civilization. I'm just recalling this to remind you how the jungle life calls a man back.

"Well, I didn't say much then. I let you fellows do the talking. But I was already fed up; restless; dreaming about the wilds down here; aching to get back. You may remember that I wrote a few articles about the Amazonian aborigines which attracted some attention. I tried to tell myself I was doing it to further scientific knowledge. But I wasn't. I was doing it because my thoughts kept revolving around this region down here, and the writing was a partial outlet for those thoughts.

"The outlet was too small. It was like trying to relieve pressure on a dam by boring a gimlet-hole in it. The little trickle that came through did no good. The pressure kept on increasing. By and by the dam broke."

He paused, searching the faces of his auditors.

"That's a muddy explanation," he deprecated. "I'm no professor, with the gift of making things clear. But maybe you get my drift."

"Sure," nodded Knowlton. "We know what that kind of pressure is. The only way a fellow can ease it is to go out and get action. You had to break loose and come south."

"Exactly. I stood it off as long as I could. Then I had to come fast. Didn't see any reason for dragging you fellows into it—two of you were out of reach anyway, and Tim was bucking the stock game—By the way, Tim, how did you make out?"

"Went broke," grunted Tim.

"So? Tough luck. Not surprizing, though. You're too honest for that game.

"Well, I came south, alone. Had a desire to see just what sort of people the Jiveros were. Knew I was likely to lose my own head, but took a chance. Been taking chances ever since.

"I had a plan, of course. Also an excuse. My excuse—to myself—was that it would be a valuable contribution to science to obtain all possible information about the head-shrinking tribes. My plan was something like this:

"I would find some town where some of the Jiveros came to trade, as they sometimes do. When any of them came in I'd give them some presents; tell them I wanted to visit them; let them carry news of me to their people; get on the right side of them and gradually ease my way into their country. As insurance for my life, I'd promise them more presents—things they'd give their eye-teeth to get—to be delivered to them *after I returned* to the town I set out from. I'd play up those presents all the time I was with them, keeping it in their minds that if they killed me they'd never get those wonderful things. Since those gifts would be worth a good deal more to them than my head would, I'd have a decent chance of living to keep my promises. Sounds crazy, of course. Still, it might have worked.

"From what I could learn at Riobamba, I figured Macas as my best bet. Started over-land with a young army of Quichua packers bossed by a half-breed *capataz*—foreman. Followed the old Upano trail—hundreds of years old, and horrible going; it runs south from Riobamba to the lakes where the Rio Upano starts, then cuts east through the mountains, flanking the Upano more or less, and ends at Macas. I never reached——"

"Wait a minute," interposed Knowlton. "We heard that you came down the Pastasa and were seen at Ambato——"

"Somebody lied. I never saw Ambato. Never saw Macas, either. That half-breed *capataz* was a bad egg. Steered me away to the south of Macas, on a branch trail. He and the whole gang quit me in the night, with most of my equipment. But he got his. Months later I found their heads and my plunder in a Huambiza house."

"Yeah?" chuckled Tim. "So that's why yer gang never come out, hey? Them Warm Beezers done a good job that time!"

Rand nodded, a grim smile quirking his mouth.

"Right. They settled my score for me. Also, they got for nothing all the fine presents that were to be my insurance. I was left in a beautiful pickle. If I'd been a green explorer, as that *capataz* thought, I'd be dead long ago, as he intended. He didn't know I had once been a jungle Indian for five long years..

"It didn't take me long to find out what I was up against. I didn't know where Macas was, and I wasn't fool enough to throw away my life trying to find out. I was completely lost, and I knew it. And I knew I had to do one of two things—remain a white man and die like one, or turn Indian again and live like one. And so, right then and there, I did a backslide.

"I went the limit. Found a brook, made a little hang-out, and cached everything I had left—clothes and all—except knife and gun and cartridges. Went naked. Found a hole among the trees and sat in the sun awhile every day, tanning myself, toughening my skin. Made bow and arrows to save cartridges and hunt quietly. Got plenty to eat, and saw nobody. Killed several *tigres* and made a claw necklace and armlets. Killed some toucans and a jabiru stork and saved the feathers. Before the half-breed turned crooked he had told me that any Jivero who wore ear-tufts made from these feathers was a great hunter—those two birds are hard to get, you know. So I made ear-tufts, pierced my lobes with thorns, kept the holes open until they healed, and then wore the feathers. Yes, I went the limit.

"Why? Because I'd determined to visit the Jiveros anyhow. Since I couldn't be a white man and live, I was going to be a thorough Indian—and a he-man Indian with hunter's badges and everything. And what's more, I was having the time of my life. I even quit thinking of myself as a white man playing Indian—I *was* Indian. It came easy. I enjoyed it. The only trouble was that I was lonesome.

"When I was ready I quit my hang-out, carrying nothing but weapons and a hide bag full of cartridges. Followed the brook to a creek, and the creek to the Rio Morona. Scouted down the river; found another creek showing signs of use; went up that; found a Huambiza tribe-house; looked it over; saw that it looked peaceable at the moment; and walked right in and made myself at home."

Again he paused, a slight smile of reminiscence lightening his somewhat set expression.

"Ye sure had yer nerve, feller!" breathed Tim. "And what'd they do about it?"

"Nothing. Crowded around, made faces, jabbered, wrangled about whether to kill me, but let me live. Huambizas are human. Curious as children. I was a freak: a white Indian with green eyes. Their eyes are always black or brown. They wanted to know all about me before killing me. I kept them interested. Talked mostly by signs, of course. Lied like ——. Told them I was a Mayoruna from the Rio Javary. Said I got the gun and cartridges from a white man I'd killed. They believed that, because I wore the expert hunter's ear-badge. If I was a top-notch hunter I must be a good man-killer; that's how they reasoned.

"The chief figured I'd be a handy man in his gang. Tried me out first at hunting. I made good. Then his outfit went on a raid into Jivero territory, across the Morona, taking me along. Jiveros never were my friends, and I was more than willing to shoot 'em up. I did my share of fighting, and more. The raid was a huge success, and I was high gun. But I took no heads or women; let the chief and the medicine man have my share. That made them like me all the better. After that I wasn't watched so closely. Could do about as I pleased.

"What really pulled me through, though, was my Indian training years ago; my ability to be really Indian and speak, act, think Indian. There isn't one white man in a million who could have put it over. But I did.

"I learned practically all there was to know about the Huambiza customs, beliefs, mode of living, head-shrinking process, and so on. Could have escaped down the Morona without much difficulty, and gotten home via the Amazon. But I hardly even thought about it. The scientific world —even the white man's world—might as well have been on another planet.

"I had back-slid a good deal farther than I expected to or intended to. I had gone back several thousand years. I, David Rand, wealthy, educated, socially eligible, and so on, had ceased to be even a white man. I was a savage. I was content to remain a savage. With the way to the white man's world open before me, I couldn't take it.

"I couldn't go back!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE THROWBACK

"DO YOU actually mean to tell us," demanded McKay, "that you liked the life of those infernal head-hunters so well that you couldn't break away from it?"

Rand sighed, as if facing a hopeless task.

"I was afraid you wouldn't understand," he said. "As I told you, this is something you never met before. It's totally outside your experience. Mine, too. It's only lately that I've been able to understand my own make-up.

"When I tell you I became Indian, you don't quite follow me. You think I mean that I was still Dave Rand of New York, *playing* at being an Indian. But I mean that *I was Indian*. By 'Indian' I don't mean a redskin; I mean a primitive man: the same kind of man our white ancestors were in pre-historic times. They were savages, like the present-day red or brown man whom we call 'Indian'. I am that kind of savage.

"Listen. Every one of us is the descendant of thousands—perhaps millions—of ancestors. Every one of us has in him certain characteristics inherited or acquired from his immediate ancestors, and others handed down to him from his remotest progenitors. Now and then a child comes into the world who is altogether unlike anybody born into his family within the memory of recent generations. He remains different all his life; his mental make-up is a mystery to his people, and usually to himself. The fact is that that man is a throw-back to some forgotten forefather. Perhaps his dominant characteristics are those of a very early ancestor. Let him get into an environment that fits those characteristics, and he may revert completely to the original type. He is an atavism.

"That's what I am. An atavism."

A short silence ensued. McKay and Knowlton watched him with thoughtful frowns, turning over this revelation in their minds. Tim looked blank, but asked no questions. All waited for the strange man, whom they had known so well and yet so little, to go on.

"When I was a youngster," Rand resumed, "I was always restless. Got into the roughest games I could find. Got into a lot of fights. Had no use for girls. There

are plenty of boys like that. Usually their folks tame them down as they grow older. Mine tried to. They didn't understand me. Plenty of money, social position, and all that; and they didn't approve of my rough tendencies—wanted me to be a 'nice boy'. I did the best I could, for their sakes. But my best wasn't very good.

"We traveled every Summer—Europe, Egypt, other regular places—but I was always dissatisfied and bored: hungry for something, some other place, without knowing just what I wanted. After college I traveled on my own hook; saw Japan, Asia, and so on; still bored. Didn't know enough to come down here. I'd been brought up to move in the usual expensive beaten paths, and didn't know any others.

"Then I did get down here—and had five years of ——. But here's the point: I lived through it, where any other white man of my set would have died. When I got hit in the head by a bullet and my brain went foggy—my expensively educated white man's brain—I became a wild jungle man without the least difficulty. And I lived that way for five years. That prehistoric man inside me, who had been driving me over the earth hunting for some place where he could be content, came into his own. He was crippled, weakened, but he pulled me through.

"When you knocked white-man ideas back into my skull I was glad to go home. Even now, I never want to see that Javary region again; I suffered too much there. But before long I was restless, and when you chaps decided to try for gold down here I came along. And for the first time in my life I felt at home. Thought it was because I'd spent so long a time in the jungle before. Now I know better. It was thousands of years older than that.

"But I was still Dave Rand of New York; one of four civilized white men. Constant association with you fellows kept me civilized. When you were ready to go back, I went. I remained David Rand, white man, until I was here alone—completely cut off from anything civilized; surrounded by aboriginal influences. Then my environment was right: the savage life, absolutely primitive conditions. I back-slid the whole distance. My atavistic self got control.

"It wasn't a question of liking the head-hunters, Rod. I don't like them; don't like their ——ish head-shrinking. But aside from their murderous tendencies—and perhaps even there—their life is that of our own primitive white ancestors. They war, they hunt, they attack and are attacked by man-eating cats and huge reptiles, just as your forefathers and mine did in bygone ages. This part of the world is still in the raw. It—it's *my* world!"

It was Knowlton, more sensitive and sympathetic than his companions, who nodded as Rand stopped, glancing from man to man.

"I think we understand, Dave," he encouraged. "Go on."

"Well, I stayed. But I had my troubles. I still was not a Huambiza; I was a Mayoruna, an outlander. Other warriors were jealous. They watched for their chance to do me in. I knew it. Saw I had to make myself top dog or go under. It would take too long to tell you how I fought my way up. I worked fast—no half-way measures—and got control. After a while I had a big gang jumping when I snapped the whip.

"Since they live to fight, I gave them plenty of fighting. What's more, I chanced on a jungle drug that makes men absolutely fearless. Caught a medicine-man drinking it before a fight and bullied the secret out of him. It's a root called *kaapi*, and a little drink of the brew from it will make a dwarf feel like a giant. Gave it to my men after that, and there was no stopping them when they went into action. It wears off after a while, of course, but the usual jungle battle doesn't last long.

"Between the *kaapi* and the natural ferocity of the Huambizas, we licked every outfit we tackled. I got a big reputation, and fighters came in from all around to join my crowd whenever a raid was afoot. We warred altogether on other native tribes—Jiveros and Antipas—and kept away from the towns. The men were always itching to tackle a town—Macas, for one—and get Spanish heads and women. But I held them off. Kept them fighting their own natural enemies—dog eat dog."

"You couldn't quite get away from your white blood, then," interjected McKay.

"Maybe not. But I didn't go through any mental struggles about the ethics of attacking or not attacking a town. I was the prehistoric man, doing as he pleased. I pleased to fight Jiveros and not to fight whites. If the people of Macas, or any

other place, had made me their enemy I'd have jumped them like anybody else."

His eyes had narrowed again, and their defiant gleam showed that he knew this declaration would damage him—and that he did not care.

"I see." McKay's tone hardened. "And why did it please you to turn your fiends loose against your old partner, José Martinez? Were you offered any inducements by Peru, for instance?"

"Inducements? I don't know what you're talking about. Peru is nothing in my life. I hit back at José Martinez because José Martinez had taken from me the one thing in the world that I cared about!"

"You mean— Hm! You mean Nuné?"

"I mean Nuné."

FOR the first time since the conference had begun he glanced upward at the girl. All through the talk she had stood soundless, tireless, her steady gaze fixed on the faces turned toward her Rana, her quick perceptions seeking to interpret expressions and tones. Now she looked questioningly down at the man whom she had long ago acknowledged as her lord. With a wordless gesture he indicated that she should sit beside him. Obediently she sank on a chair.

"I mean this girl," he repeated. "I've never been a woman's man. You know that. I learned early to see through the hypocrisy and selfishness and artificiality of 'the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady', and the older I grew the more hard-boiled I was toward women. But—well, blood calls to blood, after all. This young lady's as white as you are. Do you know her history?"

Nods answered.

"All right. When I knew her over west I was sorry for her. I thought that was all my feeling amounted to—just sympathy. After she disappeared I woke up. I realized then that she was the only real girl I'd ever known, and that she was *my* girl. I had to find her and kill the man who had taken her. I went on the war-path in dead earnest.

"Jiveros took her away, you know. I went after the Jiveros rough-shod. But we lost all trace of her. Finally we found some women who knew about her. They said she'd been captured from the Jiveros by the Sumataras and taken east. The Sumataras had wiped out their place and carried off all but four of the women. Those four had been found by Jivero men and brought to the settlement where I found them——"

"Begorry, them's the women that tried poisonin' us!" Tim broke in. "Remember, looey? Hozy made 'em stay behind. And lookit what come of it! If he'd killed 'em, Dave would be pokin' round the bush yet. And Hozy wouldn't be in hospital, and a lot o' his gorillas would be livin' instead o' gone up in smoke, and— Gee, wouldn't them women give us the laff if they knowed how they got back at Hozy! But listen here, Dave, did ye know them Sumatarries was Hozy's outfit? If ye did, whyn't ye jest send him word, or——"

Rand gave a short, harsh laugh.

"Send word how? By whom? A Huambiza? Or go myself, as a Huambiza leader? Would any Huambiza live long enough to reach him? Humph! Are you forgetting that José and all his crowd—and you too—were on the war-path against me?"

Tim was silenced.

"I knew it was his crowd, of course," Rand went on. "The women said four white men headed his gang—bearded men with guns. They also said one of the white men—the leader—took Nuné as his woman. I never thought of you three as the other men. Thought they were Spaniards—probably outlaws—who had joined José and fought for him.

"When I heard that José had carried off Nuné I just tore east. Raided another Jivero settlement, took prisoners, made them guide us to this place——"

"Well!" exclaimed Knowlton. "That was just what José did, trying to find you."

"I know. Well, I came, I saw, and I conquered—almost. I captured José, and if you hadn't knocked me out I'd soon have found out what he'd done with my girl.

"If you still think I had no business to attack José, think again. Had I any reason to doubt that he'd taken Nuné as his own woman? I once saw him take five wives at once, and four more later on. One more wouldn't strain his conscience. I knew he was consistently running off Jivero women as slaves. It looked pretty obvious that he had taken Nuné as his property—one way or another. And neither he nor any other man could get away with that while I could find him!

"And remember again that he went on the war-path against me. Why? I'd never harmed him. I didn't steal his women. I kept off his grounds. I was just as much his old partner as he was mine—but that didn't prevent him from starting west to smash me! And he started because he was afraid! He was afraid I might become as big as he was, and afraid to give me the chance!"

The accusation sank home. The three looked at one another, remembering José's own statement that he must crush the Huambizas before they became too powerful; that Rand's fate must be "capture or death." Rand went on, his mouth tightening and his eyes beginning to blaze.

"José Martinez brags that he is a son of the *conquistadores*. He is swollen with the idea of being a *conquistador* too. He fights to make a kingdom for himself and his half-breed sons. He grabs like his brutal ancestors. He kills, he takes women slaves, like the Jiveros! And when he finds that an old partner of his is getting some power too, he forgets partnership—friendship—everything but his own ambition. What I did to him was no more than he was trying to do to me, with less reason. And yet it sticks in your tender crops that *I* struck at *him!* You, who claim to be my friends——"

He broke off, clamping his jaws to repress further denunciation: his civilized sense of fairness struggling with the unreasoning rage of his primitive self. He knew, since Knowlton's explanation, why these old-time comrades had done as they did; yet his enmity toward José, still alive, impelled him almost to include them again with the Spaniard. The atavistic side of his nature, given free rein through recent months, was cropping out strongly again. And the three across the board, studying him, grudgingly admitted that his analysis of himself was true.

The Rand whom they had known had been a taciturn man schooled in repression; a dogged, quietly likable fellow who never quit, never complained, never lost control of his temper. This man whom they now saw was the one whose existence they had never suspected: the hot-headed aborigine, slow to forget and slower to forgive, who had been imprisoned so long within the shell developed by refined environment. That shell now was broken. Could Rana, the primitive, be brought again under the control of Rand, the civilized?

"You're not quite right about José, and not quite right about us, and you'll realize it when you think it over," Knowlton said quietly. "But we won't argue that point at present. We see your side of it now—you could hardly expect us to know all this until you told us. But the big point isn't what's gone by, but what's to come. You sure had a rip-roaring time as a head-hunter chief, but you've reached the end of your rope. If we can get you off this prison of a rock, the only sensible thing for you to do is to go home and make the best of it. You can take Nuné and have her educated——"

The expression in the green eyes made him pause. It was a contemptuous, pitying look, as if he were a defective child babbling nonsense. When Rand again spoke it was in a cold, controlled tone, his sentences close-clipped.

"Not a chance," he said. "Nobody can leave this rock alive until José says so. So far as I'm concerned, he won't say so. I'm done. I've hit him too hard. He'll take his revenge. There'll be an execution, and I'll be through.

"If I could go back to the States, I wouldn't. I've found my home—the jungle. I'd stay. Neither would I educate Nuné in the shams and shames of civilization. She's real. I'll keep her so.

"Wait. Don't talk about my money and so on. Let it rot. All money ever did for me was make me discontented. I can't use it here. Let civilization have it. That's all civilization wants—money.

"I've talked enough. Too much, perhaps. Now it's all said. So I'll go back to my room with my wife."

He arose, motioning Nuné toward the inner door. With a sidelong caressing glance she moved away.

"Your—what?" exclaimed McKay.

"My wife."

Rand moved calmly after her.

"We savages—we atavisms—don't bother with clergymen and church mummeries. Especially when we haven't long to live. We mate. But since Nuné likes to be a priestess, she has married herself to me with her cross. Our marriage went into full effect several days ago. That's all."

Through the doorway they passed, vanishing down the corridor. At the outer

portal a couple of lurking watchmen drew back and were gone. At the king's table McKay and Knowlton and Tim looked speechlessly at one another. There was nothing more to be said.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MISTS BREAK

MIST, streaked by sun, eddied around the royal rock.

The houses stood blurred, half-seen. The bowl below was a void in which, as the filmy folds of fog shifted, the nearer trees sometimes loomed vaguely, then vanished again. The heights beyond were, so far as the eye of any look-out could perceive, wiped from existence.

Rain had fallen in the night, as it fell every night now, growing heavier as the weeks rolled by; and the rising sun was engaged in its daily fight to rout the beleaguering ground-fogs as the White Ones had cut apart the Huambiza horde. To the three yawning men who strolled along the edge and cast bored glances out into the blankness, it seemed that many a long and weary moon had elapsed since the last battle-yell of that racial fight had died out. And there was no indication that their stay there was nearing its end.

"Yo-ho-ho-hum!" yawned Tim. "Same ol' stuff and no hope in sight. Everything foggy, even when there ain't no real fog round here. I mean we dunno nothin'; no more'n we knowed six weeks ago. Dave's a human clam—ain't spoke a hundred words since that day he told the hist'ry of his life. Hozy won't see nobody; we dunno what he's figgerin' on, or even how he is. And we've got to stick round till somebody or somethin' moves. Me, I'm so sick o' this dump I feel like divin' off and takin' a swim in that there fog."

He summarized the situation and the sentiments of the other two. Except for one more call by Knowlton on José—at which the lieutenant had candidly and thoroughly explained the change in Rand—the Spaniard had not been seen by any of the Americans. He had listened in silence, but his hard eyes had boded no good for the white Huambiza. And so, though the three adventurers knew they could go unhindered whenever they willed if they would leave Rand behind, not one of them would budge from the rock. They were determined to be in at the final settlement, and, if necessary, to line themselves up solidly behind Rand. But the monotony of waiting was increasingly irksome.

Rand himself knew nothing of Knowlton's tentative mediation with José. When the blond man visited him in turn, the first mention of the Spaniard's name had evoked a growl so savage that the would-be peacemaker desisted from further talk. And since that time he had been as intractable as any Indian. Attempts by all three of the northerners to revive his interest in the doings of the outside world had failed. He even ate his meals in the room allotted to him and Nuné, never appearing at the table where his countrymen habitually dined.

Now, as usual, the three plodded halfway around the rock in their before-breakfast stroll, inhaling deeply, walking off the sluggishness born of the heavy night air. Then, cutting across, they headed back toward their quarters. As they approached the house, McKay squinted ahead and lengthened his stride.

"Guards are gone," he pointed out.

It was true. For the first time since Rand had entered the house, no spearmen flanked the doorway. A quick look flashed between Knowlton and Tim. They quickened their gait to a lope.

"If them guys have pulled any dirty stuff while we was out—" growled Tim, his fists closing.

He left the sentence unfinished, but curt grunts of agreement followed it. They entered the house at a run.

"José!" ejaculated Knowlton.

José, wan and thin, but smiling at their surprize, sat in his great chair at the head of the board. The pair of missing guards, and four others besides, stood behind him; motionless, statuesque, their lances still as if planted in the ground.

"*Sí*, it is I," bowed José. "May a poor cripple sit at your table?"

"Faith, he can that, if he don't eat too much," grinned Tim. "But do we have to feed them guys too?"

"Not so," laughed the king. "You need not even feed me. I am not yet hungry—for food." The mirth died from his face as he added: "But I have hunger to settle a certain matter now—at once. It has waited too long."

The faces fronting him froze. For a moment the three stood motionless, searching his grim visage, running their eyes over the sinister spearmen.

"A bit early in the day, isn't it?" suggested McKay. "Plenty of time after breakfast."

"True. But I eat better when nothing is on my mind." An enigmatical smile flickered and was gone. "So I shall dispose of this matter first and have it finished. Shall I send these—" he motioned toward his soldiers "—to the room of the man Rand, or will you bring him?"

"We'll go."

The captain's voice was chill. He strode inward, followed by his comrades. The going of the trio was somehow reminiscent of their landing at the raided Jivero settlement on the Yana Yacu—the same aggressive stride, the same compact formation, the same turning of backs on José. And as they went, the sharp eyes of the king studied those backs, and under his bold black brows gleamed an odd light.

Down the passageway marched the Northerners, halting before the closed door of Rand.

"Dave!" McKay called bruskly. "José is here. Wants to see you. Come out when you're ready."

An instant of silence. Then a grunt from within. They faced about, stepped back, entered their own room. Unspeaking, they picked up their pistol-belts, buckled them about their hips, briefly inspected the weapons, reholstered them—and left the holsters unbuttoned. Each looked squarely at the others. Then they strode out.

Rand's door opened. From it emerged a nude figure, shoving a hand backward through its black hair, purposely bristling it into unkempt disorder. It turned, muttering a curt command to the anxious-eyed girl who would follow. She hesitated, then obeyed. As her man stalked forward to meet his fate, she remained behind.

Rand, who might have gone into court with his white-man clothing and the presence of Nuné to plead mutely for him, had deliberately discarded both. His only garb was a clout, formed by a strip torn from his shirt. Had he still possessed them, he would have worn his barbaric ear-tufts and claw necklace. As it was, he stalked truculently past, muscular arms swinging as if carrying jungle weapons, bare toes gripping the ground as if it were a jungle trail, jaw hard and black-lashed lids narrowed as if confronting a jungle enemy. Without a word, McKay and Knowlton and Tim swung in after him.

So they entered the presence of the man whose decree was law. Straight up to the table strode Rand, halting two paces from José. Behind him, his escort stopped in skirmish-line, six feet apart, thumbs hooked into gun-belts. At sight of the naked, hostile Huambiza chief the six Sumatara guards moved, their erect spears swaying simultaneously like tall grass swept by a hot wind. But then, as their ruler spoke no word of command, they again became immobile.

José sat unmoved, level-eyed, scanning the defiant captive and the stern men backing him. A glimmer of amusement seemed to dawn and die on his hawk-like visage. Abruptly, harshly, he spoke—

"What have you to say?"

"Nothing!"

The retort was as harsh as his own tone.

"So! That saves time. You have brought an army against me; killed my men; fought to make my women slaves; failed and been captured——"

"Not by you!"

A flush shot over the wan face. But the Spaniard's voice was steady as he went on:

"It does not matter. You are caught; your army is destroyed. You offer no defense. There can be only one end for such a man."

Rand made no answer. His face became wooden, his attitude stolid. José, after waiting a minute or two, continued:

"That is, there could be only one end if that man were in his senses. But when his brain is wrong, and he has friends at hand to take him away, the most merciful thing is to send him away with them. So I am rid of him, and——"

"To —— with your mercy!" flared the captive. "My brain's as good as yours. I stand on my own legs. I have no friends."

"So?" José stroked his mustache. "That is sad—to have no friends. It is more sad to lack brains enough to take advantage of a way out. You are right. You deserve no mercy. Yet— Suppose, Señor Huambiza, that you could escape from my power. What would you do then? Attack me once more?"

"With what?" jeered the other.

"Ah. That is so. With what? You could never return to the Huambizas. Your power among them is gone. Your head would quickly be filled with the hot sand. And the girl Nuné might not fare so well among them then. *Bien.* So you would not attack me again if free. But if I should keep Nuné here——"

"Try it!" Rand broke in ominously.

"Ah. Then you would come back, yes? You would make an army from the monkeys of the trees, perhaps, and attack poor old José. That would be very bad. I must not let it happen. Well, then, if you and Nuné should both go free, what would you do?"

THE clouted man scowled at him. José seemed playing with his victim; yet there seemed to be an object behind it—a probing prompted not by cruel enjoyment, but by some hidden purpose. Some of the hostility died out of the green eyes as their owner pondered the question.

"Go our own way," he answered at length. "Out there somewhere."

He moved his chin, Indian-like, toward the unseen, limitless jungle.

"Ah," reiterated José. "You would not return to your United States?"

"No!"

The king smiled and leaned back more comfortably in his great chair, resting his head against the jaguar-hide.

"So you would be a savage; a lone prowler of the wilds, with only your woman to keep you company. But after a time that life would grow stale. A man with a white man's brain, who had been a commander of fighting men, could not remain forever satisfied with such an existence. Nor could a girl of Spanish blood be content with it. And if she could—death strikes suddenly in the jungle. When you were struck down by snake or *tigre* or Jivero, Nuné would then be alone; helpless, perhaps, with a babe or two. And then what?"

The prisoner's scowl bit deeper. But it was a different sort of scowl; it showed that he caught the dread vision suggested by his inquisitor, and that he knew well how true the prediction might become. Puzzlement, too, was plain in the expression now dominating his face as he studied the Spaniard. He voiced no reply.

"You had not thought of that," José resumed. "Yet you know that I speak truth. You would not let harm come to Nuné. Was it not because of her, and her alone, that you brought my enemies upon me?"

Rand, still studying him, nodded.

"*Bien.* Now listen to a little story.

"Once upon a time there was an outlaw who made himself king. At first he was ambitious for himself alone. But as he worked to build up his new kingdom, his ideas changed. He realized that he himself was only a guide for his people, and his task was to make them as powerful as possible while he lived, and to weaken their enemies. And so he raided and fought, to destroy the foes of his new nation.

"The time came when he might have deserted his little kingdom and gone back to his own land with honor, to live again among white men. But he found that he could not do it. His work had fastened upon him so that he could not turn traitor to it. He had to stay and carry on what he had begun.

"Now this king had had four good friends from the North. They had gone and left him, but often their memories came back to him; and those memories meant much, for he had only Indians about him, and at times he was sick for the companionship of another white man—a white man whose mind was like his own and whose heart was strong and true. He was lonely—so lonely that at times it became a sharp pain gnawing at him. But his friends were far away, and he thought never to see them again.

"Then the four comrades came back to him—but not together. One of them had become an enemy; and because that one was an enemy, the other three were not so friendly at times as before. This hurt the king. But he tried not to show it. For the sake of his people he must crush his enemy, even if he should lose all four of his friends. So he tried to do so. There was a battle, and in it his three friends saved him from his enemy, and captured his enemy also.

"In this fight the king was badly hurt, and his hurt was not altogether that of the body. He had told himself that the friend who had turned against him must be mad. But when he looked into the eyes of that man he saw there no madness, but a bitter hate. Then that old friend struck him down.

So, when the king came to himself again, he hated that man in return with all his strength—as was only natural.

"But in his sickness the king turned things over and over in his mind. He was in a mist, as all the land outside is now; and he could not see clearly anything but his hate for that man, which was very close to him. Then there came through that mist one who opened up the fog and made him see a number of things. One of them was that his old friend had been changed by the jungle into another man. Another was that there had been mist in that man's eyes also when he struck, so that he thought the king an enemy instead of a friend. And as the king thought about this afterward, he began to see other things.

"One of these new things was that after his friends should leave him again he would be more lonely than before. And it came to him that it was a pity that he and the friend who had become his enemy could not be friends again. That man had proved himself to be a fierce and powerful fighter, and a better jungle-man than the king himself. If he wished to remain in the jungle, he would find the king's men much more to his liking than the savages whom he had commanded before, since they were more like himself and almost white.

"And if he would fight for the king as he had fought against him, he would be most valuable to the king—not alone as a commander of warriors, but as a comrade to the king in his loneliness. And if the king should be killed in a fight or die suddenly, then this comrade could carry on his work; for the king knew his new nation was not yet strong enough to stand without a white man's head to direct it. In twenty years, perhaps, when the babes of today were men, the kingdom might be firm enough to grow as it should; but not now.

"So when the king could walk again he walked to see that man. He wished to learn whether that man was truly fearless and hard and strong, or whether he was one of those who fight fiercely in a crowd but crumble when they must stand alone and face bad fortune. He has learned. And now he waits to know whether that man will be again his friend, and stand beside him in the work he means to do."

Utter stillness filled the room. José sat motionless, his hollow eyes dwelling on the amazed face of the ex-Huambiza. Somehow he looked very frail, very weary, as he leaned there against the jaguar-hide. In the past few weeks he had looked on his own death—and, as his words showed, beyond. This was no swashbuckling, red-handed *conquistador* who now sat at the table of the king. He was a man humbled, yet exalted, by his wanderings in the mists.

Nor was the nude man facing him now the truculent, recklessly hostile atavism who had entered the room. His green eyes were wide, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly, his whole attitude that of mingled incredulity and irresolution. Once his brow darkened and his gaze bored into that of José as if he suspected an elaborate hoax. Then his expression cleared, and he looked unseeingly at the motionless White Ones standing like symbols of the new command awaiting him.

"You — mean — that!" he muttered, huskily.

José made no answer. None was needed.

Then Rand stiffened. Firmly, but without animosity, he again met the gaze of the king.

"I stay with no man as a subordinate," he said.

"I want no white subordinate," was the quiet reply. "My subordinates are Indians. I want—a partner."

An instant longer Rand wavered. All at once a broad smile broke over his face. He strode forward, hand outstretched.

"Then, by ——, you've got one!" he vowed.

The two right hands met with a slap. The watchful Sumataras moved again, then paused, uncertain as to whether the two commanders were fighting again or merely trying some strange shaking test of strength. At a curt word from their master, who seemed to see everything, they relaxed.

"Whoopee!" howled Tim, breaking the spell which had held him and his companions. "Yee-ow! Hot dog! Wha'd'ye know! All together, fellers! Blow off the roof in honor o' the kink and his side-kick! Oh you Hozy! Oh you Dave!

His pistol leaped aloft. McKay and Knowlton, swept off their feet by his sudden exuberance, snatched their guns from their holsters. The room roared with smashing concussions as the weapons vomited flame and lead at the inoffensive palm thatch above. Not until the weapons

were empty did the ripping salute cease. Then the three hurled themselves at José and Rand, pounding their shoulders and shaking their arms until the king yelled for mercy to his wounded side.

"*Válgame Dios!* Do you wish Señor Dave to become king at once?" he cried. "At least let me eat breakfast before you murder me!"

"José, you're a real man! And a real king!" declared McKay. "I've been doubting you—but *I* haven't chivalry enough to do what you've just done!"

"It is not chivalry, Rodrigo," José hastily disclaimed. "It is sense. When you meet a man too strong for you to overcome, it is good sense to make him your friend. Is it not true?"

Then, with a wave of the hand, he pointed toward the outer door. There the sun now shone bright and hot.

"See, *amigos*, the mists have cleared," he went on. "Let no more of them come between us. And now, partner Dave, go and get shirt and breeches—and your wife—and let us all eat *desayuno* as white people should. I knew my appetite would be better when this thing was finished."

CHAPTER XXVIII

ADIOS

FIVE white men stood together for the last time at the council-table of King José.

Three of them, belted and booted for the dim trails, listened to the talk of the Spanish king himself, who, though erect and steady, rested slightly against the board as if not over-strong. The fifth, barefoot but clad in llanchama garments like those of the ruler, poised easily and watched the others with inscrutable green eyes.

Outside, ready and waiting, a score of athletic warriors lounged beside small basket-packs. Each was a picked man, tireless and trustworthy, armed with carbine and machete. With them waited the perpetually grinning Curac, commander of the detachment.

"I regret that I cannot go with you," José was saying, "but I have not yet the strength. I regret, too, that I cannot send with you my new partner, but I fear that you might steal him from me and carry him home——"

"I'd be back," interjected Rand, his set expression lightening as his glance went to a slender form beyond the table.

"Hah! Yes. If you did not return, *por Dios*, she would not long be husbandless. She likes to be a queen. She might, after all, become the tenth wife of José!"

All looked at Nuné, who stood smiling, uncomprehending the talk but easily reading the admiration in the masculine eyes. Once more she was gowned in the feather-dress of a queen of the rock—now not merely a temporary masquerade, but her rightful costume by virtue of her lord's new power. The proud set of her head, the graceful dignity of her pose, showed that José spoke truth. Nuné reveled in her royalty.

"Faith, ye needn't do nothin' like that," Tim objected. "Any time this li'l lady need a new man, send me a telegram or a radio or somethin', and she won't have to wait long."

"I will bear it in mind, *amigo*," José chuckled. "But, joking aside, comrades, I cannot send Dave with you because I now need him here; and he does not yet know the eastern trails which you will follow. The men under Curac will guide you more speedily and surely.

"Your best way out is to the eastward, as I have said. First by land to a creek, down the creek to a river which has no name, down that river to the Rio Curaray, and so into the big Rio Napo. There Curac and his men will say *adios* to you; for the journey down the Napo to the Amazon will be but play to such men as you three. When you reach the village of San Juan, near the mouth of the Napo, get an Indian guide there. He will show you a cut-off to the southeast, which will bring you out at Iquitos. And there you can await a steamer which will carry you to the sea.

"It is much the simplest and safest way out. To go back over the mountains would be hard, now that the rains grow heavy. To go down the Pastasa would be most dangerous; you will remember what came to Lieutenant Manuel Montez there. The eastward way lies through my own country, and there are no shrinkers of heads on the Napo."

McKay nodded. There was a short silence. Then——

"Well, let's go," said Knowlton.

"Wait a minute," Rand intervened. "Got a message. Wish you'd just watch me sign it and then put your own signatures to it—as witnesses to my own. Then deliver it in New York—in person. You, Rod and Merry. Will you?"

He drew a folded slip from a pocket.

"Sure!" was the hearty assent.

Rand laid the note on the table, with the writing turned under. In the blank space he wrote his name. The designated pair affixed their own signatures at the left. He folded it and handed it to McKay, unread by any of them.

"Take good care of it. Important," he warned, in a low tone. "Address is at the top. Deliver it yourselves, and be ready to take oath that you saw me sign it."

"Righto."

McKay looked curiously at him, but asked no questions. He placed the missive in a small rubber-coated wallet, shut the wallet tightly, stowed it in a secret pocket at his waist-band, and snapped the pocket-fasteners securely.

"Anything else?"

"That's all."

McKay picked up his rifle and glanced out at the waiting warriors. His mates likewise gripped their guns. Silently the three extended their right hands. Each looked deep into the eyes of the comrades he left behind.

"You will come back another time, perhaps, to see how we run our kingdom?" José asked a bit wistfully.

Slowly their heads shook. The Spaniard sighed.

"We're through here," McKay said. "May ramble in some other part of the world, but not here. We've talked it over, and—this is goodby and good luck."

"And may good luck go with you also, *compañeros*," José echoed soberly. "You will not forget us, fighting down here to build a nation. If God favors us, we shall make a monument to ourselves that shall stand long after we are gone: a strong people, where before was nothing but wild beasts."

"We won't forget."

They turned away. But Knowlton wheeled back, fumbling at a shirt-pocket.

"Say," he blurted, "speaking of monuments: Watch out for a shipment from the States in a few months. I've been thinking—well, I made a couple of sketches to pass away the time, and here's the rough one. The other's the same, only better drawn. Going to have some bronze plates made by a good man up home—ship 'em to you at Iquitos—you'll get them through some trader who knows you? Thought so. Set up a good stone block out here and put on the plates when you get them. It's just a fool idea of mine—Tim suggested it without meaning to, a while ago—it's not the same kind of statue he spoke of, though. Sort of a farewell remembrance that means something. Like it?"

José, studying the rough sketch put in his hand, looked up with eyes suddenly misty.

"*Teniente*, it means something indeed—more than I can tell you. I shall be most proud to have it. And so long as I live I shall fight to keep it true."

"Good! Well—*adios!*"

The blond man tramped doorward. The others followed, José limping slightly. Curac grunted. The lounging men sprang up, donned packs, and, with their scar-faced commander at their head, lined out toward the guard-hut where the downward path began. Outside, in the sun, the three adventurers paused for the last time, looking back at the three from whose lives they were passing forever.

"Luck, Dave!" said McKay.

"I have luck," was the serene answer.

As he spoke, the man they left behind passed an arm around the slender waist of Nuné and drew her to him.

"*Adios!*"

SOMETHING golden flashed in the fingers of Nuné. She raised it to her lips and held it there. Above the gold cross which had carried her safe through the most appalling savagery, the deep eyes of the priestess of Piatzo dwelt on the departing men who had, after all, brought her Rana to her. In their dark depths shone a farewell and a benediction, and in the gleam of the golden token at her lips was a symbolic blessing, which remained in the memories of the northerners long after they had plunged into the jungle shadows awaiting them.

Three hands rose to the brims of broad hats. Three faces turned away. Three backs receded, marching in steady unison, toward the trail. They wheeled at the guard-hut, sank below the brink, and were gone.

"Come," said José.

Across the mesa he limped, Rand and Nuné sauntering easily beside him. On a breezy point at the farther end they halted, looking down. A depression in the green marked the line of a path, and at one point the path itself was visible for a short way. After a time the king pointed to it.

Into that blank stretch of path had come moving figures: light bronze men creeping along with steady rhythm, tiny glints of sun flickering from carbines swaying in their hands. The line lengthened. Then came three brownish hats, three khaki forms. The file grew shorter, shorter, vanishing into the green blanket beyond. The three dwarfs in turn crept onward and faded out. Once more the path was empty.

Rand drew a long, slow breath. His eyes lifted, roving along the line of heights hemming in his world. Then they encountered the steady regard of José.

"Are you sorry?" quietly asked the Spaniard.

"No."

The green-eyed man's deep chest rose again; but this time he was inhaling the damp breath of the jungle as a man draws in the fragrance of his homeland. His arms stretched wide and came slowly down. A glimmer of amusement showed under his black lashes.

"That message I gave Rod," he said, "was an order to my bank to give every dollar of mine to Tim Ryan!"

A glad light flamed on the thin face of the king.

"*Por Dios!* You are a partner indeed! You burn your bridges, as I burned mine when I refused the bait of Peru. Ah, comrade, we shall pull together! We have a hard and bloody road before us, with only death at the end. Yet, while we live, we have this—" his arm swept out at the boundless, lawless jungle—"and freedom, and the devotion of handsome women and strong men. It is enough. And when we are gone——

"See what Señor Knowlton is to send us. It shall stand upon this rock. And though this rock is lost in the wilderness and that monument may never be seen by another white man, I would not exchange it for the title of Conqueror of the World!"

Into his partner's palm he pressed the little sketch depicting the bronze plates, which, by devious ways, were to come at last to the top of that jungle-buried fortress and, affixed to a block of stone left there by an unknown race, look down on a new king and a new nation. Rand studied it. Then he lifted thoughtful eyes to the man who had brought together the scattered seeds from which that nation now was growing; who, instead of destroying him and his winsome Nuné, had given them a new life and a new home, in which they could be most content and most powerful for good.

"It's true," he said. "In more ways than one. But your name isn't on it."

"No. Yet, if my name—and yours—do not live in the hearts of those who come after us, they are best forgotten. Come."

And they turned away from the out-trail and walked silently back to the houses dedicated to the destinies of the White Ones.

Of the two plates, one was oval and one was square. From the oval looked a striking likeness of José Martinez; eagle-faced, hawk-eyed, resolute, gazing far-sighted into the misty distances of an unknown land and an unborn future. Below, within the square, stood the words spoken by José on the day when he first led white men into his forbidden fastness; words before which the greatest conquerers in all history, who had slain their millions and plunged empires into agony and desolation, might well hang their heads in shame.

I FOUND A RUIN

AND

I MADE A HOME

THE END

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